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Letter from the Editor

Roll up on this!

Hip-hop music is a beautiful thing. I love all the big butts and excess, Humvees rolling up full of girlies, and great people like Nelly and LL getting their message out there to kids that they can do whatever they aspire to. Looks to me like these people are having some mad fun, and that's what life is all about; well, that and being a productive member of whatever society you happen to be a part of. As a music lover, I respect all forms of music and music culture, as well as all the people gifted enough to provide the background music for our lives...without lip synching. Music is what got me through my youth, so I have great respect for it.

With that out of the way, I have to say (well, we, actually; this one is gnawing away at us all), do we really need so many games exploiting the hip-hop culture? No offense to all of the people out there who think it's cool, but if you're a white guy trying to get all fa-shizzle, you're just a poser. Unless you love it because it's in you, give it a rest. Eminem is an anomaly. Remember Vanilla Ice? That's more like what you look like (nothing against Ice, by the way; he's a fellow moto-head, so he's all right...now). At first it was just a "yo homie" here or a "shizzle" there, but now we're looking at games so mired in hip-hop culture you barely notice the game around it.

And what's with all the wet streets bathed in neon? What city is this? And where are all these cars covered in graphics surrounded by models in bikinis? Do awesome babes really dig guys who spend their life savings tuning economy cars? Sure MTV is wall-to-wall hip-hop, but I watch Fuse and Headbanger's Ball, as I'm sure many of you do. I don't see anybody making me a game full of hair bands in black muscle cars with blown Hemis and fire-breathing headers. Where's GTA Heavy Metal, or Metal Jam or SRS in the motor city? Was *The Fast and the Furious* really such an influential movie that it turned the whole of car culture into modding? I swear, if I fire up another racing game and hear about how I gotz to roll up on something, I'm gonna need a Xanax. I realize that pop culture and video games will always mirror each other and I'm all for it. In fact, I love the idea of music-themed video games; I just want one I can call my own as a white guy raised on rock and roll and metal; have we become that endangered? There should be hip-hop games out there. All I'm saying is, what about the rest of us? I love racing games, especially the new trend of huge open cities, but I live in the suburbs and play air guitar to Velvet Revolver. Won't somebody please make me a game? Thanks yo.

PS: To answer the obvious question, as this is the issue that should have single-player Halo 2, GTA: San Andreas, Jak 3, Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal and Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater coverage...reviews are embargoed until December issues, outside of their respective exclusives. We had the opportunity to run more screens and talk about small pockets of the games, but we figured it'd be redundant since we've covered 'em all, and better to use the space otherwise. You don't need the press to tell you these are the cream of their respective crops anyway.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

"...we're looking at games so mired in hip-hop culture you barely notice the game around it."

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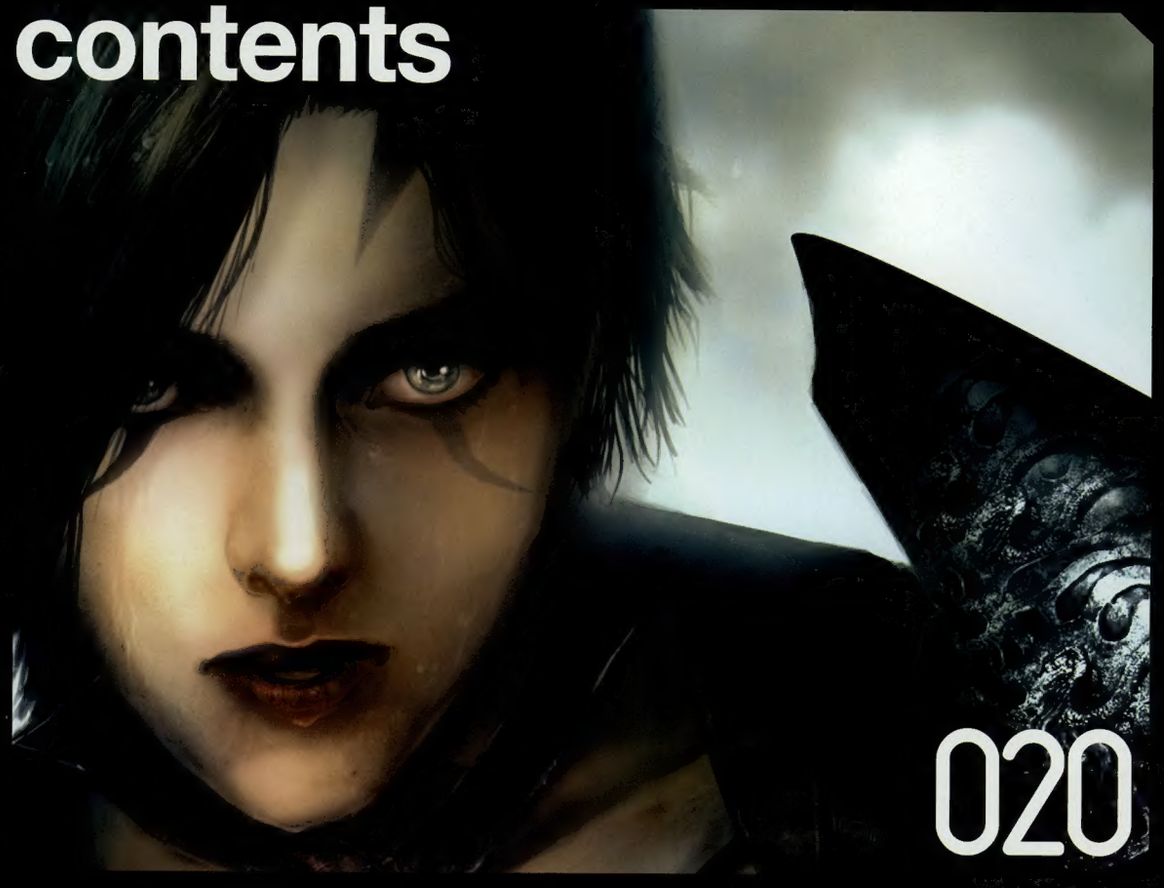
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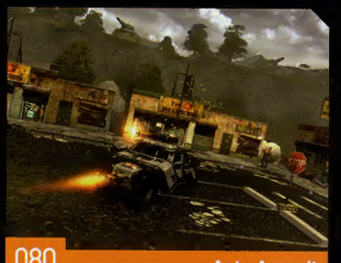
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Since no one reads contents pages, I could claim the latest in wax fruit baskets are in Gear and no one would notice



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playback

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Stop the smut

First, let me just say how much I enjoy this magazine. I've only read it for about three months now, but for once I'm looking forward to actually reading a magazine rather than ripping open the poly wrap to play the Cracker Jack demo inside. You guys are leaps and bounds ahead of the rest. More to the point, I completely agree with what Dave was saying in the October issue. Gaming in society, as I've come to know it, has always been associated with the nerdy/geek/closet psycho typecast. While it's getting there in the mainstream, other than sports games, Halo, and GTA (along with its clones) I know too few people who appreciate the Final Fantasys and Castlevanias of the world. The public at large just hasn't gotten there yet with video games (let's not BS about it with the celebrity promotions and token award shows). For game developers to not only promote, but produce smut, would be a huge blow to our fledgling subculture. For gaming to be as scrutinized as it has since its inception, and recent online incarnations, how do any of the people producing these games think the public is going to react to them? While I won't deny that this hasn't been long off, as console graphic capabilities have been getting more and more life-like, game girls have been getting hotter and hotter; and while they are controversial and racy, they've yet to become full fledged porn stars. I understand demographics, and I understand business, but games shouldn't be associated with this kind of thing. The internet already caters to that "target" audience; if anyone wants to play a game like that, they should jump online, not on a PS2. There are so many great games coming out already, games that fans have been waiting years to play, games that will probably make the industry oodles of money. For the first time since Super Nintendo, I really feel that gaming is finally hitting its stride, realizing the potential that I've always known it to have. It really surprises me that such large companies, like Microsoft and Sony, would take this route in order to generate profits. Porn is a billion dollar industry, there's no doubt that it's a good way to make money, but for the rest of us who look forward to the next Devil May Cry, Zelda, or Fable: we know better. They may make higher profits, but at the cost of selling years of our culture away.

Jammin R.

In response to all of the letters we got regarding The Guy Game (99.9 percent of which consider it a virus in need of a vaccine), all we can say is that we're really happy that our readers who like porn are getting it the old-fashioned way and hate that it's on console, while those who see rampant porn as a component in the unraveling of America are simply livid. Those Guy Game dudes best lay low. As for Sony and Microsoft, if they allow this to continue, we're absolutely sure the repercussions will far outweigh the tiny profits. We may actually win this war before it gets started. A representative for the game did call to let us know that they intentionally wouldn't be sending us a copy for obvious reasons (we were looking forward to watching the case melt too) before gloating that they did get some positive reviews and stating that they believe exploitation games will continue, thanks to their "model." We think they're smoking paint.

Teen wisdom

Good games. We all like 'em. You know the feeling of turning on the one game that you pretty much sell all that you own just to play, it's so good. But, nowadays, the best of good games are being taken from us. When I say "us," I mean kids in my age group, 14-17. Doom 3. Nope, can't buy it. GTA 3? Nope. Halo 2? No way. Can't even play it! But you can watch. I just recently went to PAX (Penny Arcade Expo), and when my step-brother and I tried to play any of the M-rated games, we got carded. You know, like

> "For game developers to not only promote, but produce smut, would be a huge blow to our fledgling subculture."

we were buying beer or smokes (neither of which I imbibe) at a gas station. This isn't the good part. No, the good part is that these very games, with all their violence, were clearly visible to toddlers in the room. Poor toddlers who earnestly watched the new Conker game, on display. Toddlers who saw Doom 3 in all its wonderful horror and are probably having nightmares right now. When we left, we complained, and got half our entry fee back. But my point is this: if you restrict play of "bad" content by age, you should at least keep those who are younger from watching.

Tom S.

Try as they might with ratings, there will always be those circumstances where kids are exposed to things they shouldn't see or don't understand; it's almost inevitable. That's where parenting needs to come in. It's up to parents ultimately to do their best to control what their kids see, and when they can't, talk to them about the differences between cartoon and/or digital violence and the consequences of bad behavior in the real world. In terms of the games you can't buy; yeah, those are all great games, but there are way more great "E" and "T" games than "M" games. Enjoy being too young to buy that stuff; it'll be over before you know it.

He likes to fight

I really hope that Capcom decides to release Street Fighter 4 sometime next year, although that may be expecting it too soon seeing how long it took for them to come out with part 3. It seems that Sammy has become the new Capcom in some ways. Guilty Gear X2: Reloaded for Xbox is wonderful. The graphics are on par, if not better than Capcom's low-res sprites. I did hear sometime ago about Sammy vs. Capcom being in the works? That's one fighting game that should be awesome, if and when it comes out. Is Capcom too egotistical to merge for this game? Lastly, any word on Capcom Fighting Evolution and Marvel vs. EA? Take care and thanks again.

Leo R.

SF 4 may not be as far away as you think, and in the meantime Marvel vs. EA is well underway for release next year. MK Deception is out (see our review on p.64), DOA Ultimate and Guilty Gear Isuka are almost here, and Capcom Fighting Evolution looks awesome (see our preview on p.46). We'll also see Tekken V soon. A Sammy vs. Capcom fighter doesn't seem far-fetched at all, especially with the new Sammy-Sega merge. If Capcom'll take on SNK and Marvel, they may as well complete the cycle and make the trip to hell for a little GG. Heck, I say they all get together and form SNK vs. Marvel vs. Sammy vs. Capcom! Fighting faded into the background briefly, but seems to be on the upswing once again!

The Red Star...

...Your text gushes about the game. Just curious as to why you tagged it with a B+ then. I don't anticipate spotting any analytical criticisms from any other media source, so I was just wondering if you'd share yours with me. I'm not trying to gauge the game for a purchase—my mind is already made up—I work within the industry so I've played the final; just trying to garner outside opinion. The reason I prod is because I really want to get a feeling for where gamers' (outside of myself and the rest of the endeavors I'm acquainted with) desires are heading in the near future.

Anonymous

For us, a B+ is a very high score. The reason it didn't crack the A barrier is because as amazing as it is, there's still a sliver of room for improvement (some platforming and animated cinemas would do well in a sequel). A B+ doesn't necesarily signify any shortcomings with a particular game, but moreover that there is room for further additions. TRS is a must-own game that needs to turn into a brand for sure.



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ink

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DS prepares for launch

Can Nintendo re-write portable gaming history yet again?

November 21 will be a big day for Nintendo fans—that's the official date Nintendo has announced for the launch of the DS in North America. Nintendo has also answered the other question that's been burning since the touch-functional dual-screened portable was unveiled back in May: the machine will sell for $149.99. Furthermore, Nintendo revealed that the DS will include a playable demo of one of its most promising releases—Metroid Prime: Hunters. The demo, dubbed Metroid Prime: Hunters: First Hunt will include single-player modes of the game as well as a four-player multiplayer mode that takes advantage of the DS' wireless capabilities. Reportedly, Metroid Prime: Hunters will include the option of several control styles, not just the stylus-based system previously seen. In addition to the Metroid Prime: Hunters demo, PictoChat, the wireless messaging/drawing software shown at E3, will also be included with the system—in fact, it will be embedded into the hardware, not packed in as a separate game card. The only big question remaining now is how many titles are expected to be available at launch. Super Mario 64x4 (which has new minigames, bosses and other features added over the original N64 version) is expected to be there, as is Activision's Spider-Man 2 and at least some of EA's line-up, which includes The Urbz, Madden NFL, Tiger Woods PGA Golf, Need for Speed Underground and GoldenEye. Of interest is the fact that the North American DS launch will be prior to the Japanese launch on Dec. 2—the first time such an event has occurred in Nintendo's history.



Majesco sets its sights on DS

Creators of Iridion to shoot once more

It won't be a launch title, but Majesco has revealed that a new 3D shooter from the makers of the Iridion games will be coming to the DS. Slated for a spring 2005 release, Nanostray promises intense action and a wide variety of weapon power-ups, along with features to take advantage of the DS' touch screen and wireless network capabilities, including an online ranking system (better screens to follow).









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Tokyo Game Show 2004

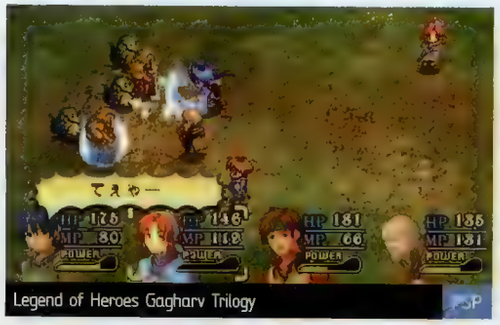
The between-meal snack to E3 bears some interesting nuggets



Held September 24 – 26 in Tokyo's Nippon Convention Center, the 2004 Tokyo Game Show once again provided a tantalizing preview of what to expect from the top video game publishers throughout Japan in the months to come. With Nintendo again sitting TGS out to wait for their own Space World show in November (and encouraging other developers to do the same as far as DS games were concerned), Sony hardware ruled the roost for both consoles and handhelds.

Among the most exciting prospects at the show were new announcements and playable versions of PSP software. Sony themselves featured Gate of Heaven and Earth, an action-RPG (emphasis squarely on the action) that was reminiscent of Dynasty Warriors; a first-person adaptation of Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex; the latest Hot Shots Golf; a new Popolocrois title; and several minigames from the PSP version of Ape Escape. Konami had the board game-like Metal Gear Acid in an officially playable form, as well as a slick sci-fi first-person shooter called Coded Arms, while Falcom offered an RPG titled Legend of Heroes Gagharv Trilogy, and Lumines, a new puzzle game from Rez creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi, was on display from Bandai.

Not surprisingly, many publishers' PSP offerings were updates of tried-and-true franchises. Namco's new Ridge Racer game was looking mighty good as it went back to the series' roots; Capcom's Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower combines the three Vampire (Darkstalkers in the U.S.) games into one and adds a new single-player Tower mode; Koei had a playable version of Dynasty Warriors; Armored Core Formula Front was on display at From Software; Sega had Puyo Pop Fever; and Taito had a PSP version of the always-reliable Puzzle Bobble series. Not to be left out, Electronic Arts was also on hand at TGS,



Legend of Heroes Gagharv Trilogy



Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex



Need For Speed Undeground: Rivals



Gate of Heaven and Earth



Dynasty Warriors

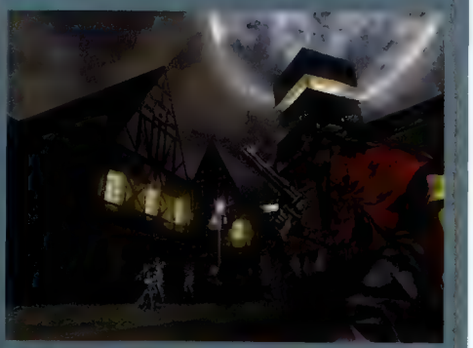


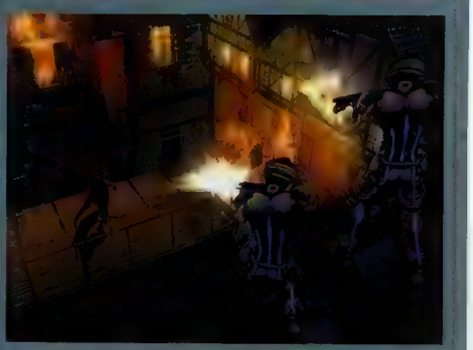
Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower

Final Fantasy VII sequel revealed

Vincent Valentine rises from his coffin

First they announced the amazing-looking *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* movie…then came the Before Crisis cell phone game…now Square Enix has unveiled the presumably last piece of the Final Fantasy VII revival puzzle: Dirge of Cerberus—Final Fantasy VII for PlayStation 2. Starring the mysterious, vampire-like Vincent Valentine in the main role, Dirge of Cerberus is set three years after Final Fantasy VII (thus one year after *Advent Children*) and centers around the emergence of a mysterious group of raiders called Deep Ground Soldiers, who have been driven out of their subterranean abode by the near-cataclysmic events surrounding Meteor. Suprisingly, Dirge of Cerberus does not appear to be an RPG, but rather an action/adventure/shooter in which Vincent uses his penchant for gunplay to dispatch his foes—definitely a new twist on the FF mythos. Square Enix has stated that other FFVII faces will join Vincent on his mission, and though we don't know if they will be playable or not, we do know that our expectations could hardly be higher.







showing the visually striking Need For Speed Underground: Rivals (scheduled to be a launch title), which looks almost as impressive as its console counterpart, along with GoldenEye and Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005.

As far as the PS2 goes, one of the highlight games was undoubtedly Sony's Wanda and the Colossus, the eagerly anticipated spiritual successor to Ico. Stunning visuals again worked wonders with light and shadow, and the gameplay, in which main character Wanda is accompanied by an enormous shape-shifting giant of stone, seems laden with creative possibilities. Other promising titles from Sony included Wild Arms: The Fourth Detonator (featuring a new hex-grid battle system) and Arc the Lad Generations, which returns the Hunters' Guild system to the series while opting for real-time combat.

Square Enix also had an impressive line-up, as usual. Aside from a brief clip of Dirge of Cerberus–Final Fantasy VII, the RPG giant also announced Front Mission 5, Radiata Stories (a fantasy RPG developed by Tri-Ace) and Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song, a remake of the Super Famicom SaGa game (which looks far superior to Unlimited SaGa). The super-deformed board game-like Dragon Quest & Final Fantasy in Itadaki Street was also on display to woo many a fanboy, and Dragon Quest VIII was playable, proving that it can get a modern makeover while still retaining its traditional gameplay style.

Konami's Oz proved to be another interesting prospect. Developed by the KCET team responsible for Suikoden III, this new action game features a fantastic visual style, three main characters, animal transformations, and combo-crazed team combat. Speaking of animal transformations, Sega finally showed Altered Beast in playable form; the game is indeed retaining its modern motif and incorporating something of a survival-horror feel.

Other noteworthy PS2 titles include Capcom's Demento, a horror game that derives its name from the Latin word for "insanity," and SNK's new version of Metal Slug, which retains the cartoony visuals while updating the game with 3D gameplay; it was shown only on video. SNK also announced the PS2 release of several classic Neo Geo games, all featuring online play: Garou: Mark of the Wolves, Last Blade 1 & 2, King of Fighters '95-'97, King of Fighters '98-'00 and Twinkle Star Sprites. Of course, for something completely different, there's Irem's Bumpy Trot—a turn-of-the-century mech action game mixed with a music game.

Even though there was much less activity on the Xbox side of things, there were still some cool-looking games—especially if you like mech combat. Metal Wolf Chaos, from From Software, was looking particularly impressive, as well as very weird. The game casts you in the role of a future president of the United States who fights terrorism by actually going into battle in his own personal mech—ridiculous taunts included. GunGriffon: Allied Strike, developed by Game Arts and published by Tecmo, was also on-hand for Xbox; it will include online play. And if you're wondering what else game Arts has been up to, they also have a new Grandia-like RPG in the works called GO; the game is currently only planned for PC.

Although some systems had a more impressive showing that others—about the only thing noteworthy on GameCube was a new Resident Evil 4 trailer—TGS 2004 overall had a lot of potentially brilliant software, proving why many still consider Japan the Mecca of the gaming industry.


Wanda and the Colossus


Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song

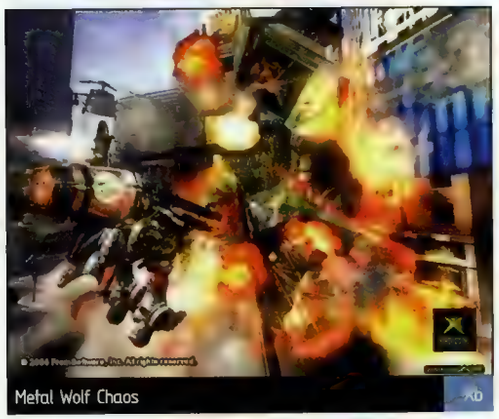


Oz


Metal Slug 3D



Bumpy Trot


Metal Wolf Chaos


GunGriffon: Allied Strike

New PS2: Looks great, less filling

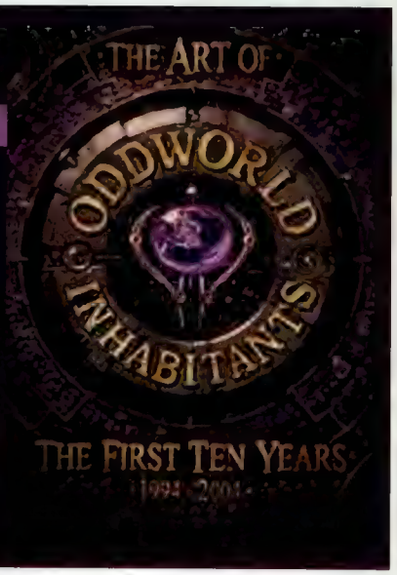
Sony's incomparable R&D artisans take the PS2 to the next level



Forget about bigger, badder and better—for Sony, it's all about sleeker, slicker and slimmer when it comes to their newly redesigned PlayStation 2, which will see release on Nov. 1 in North America and Europe and Nov. 3 in Japan. Not unlike the PSOne redesign from a few years back, the new PS2 offers a more efficient, compact design, but instead of going for "cute," the goal seems to be "style" with a load if inherent "cool" added in. At just over an inch thick, the new model looks like a flattened, shrunken version of the current hardware, featuring only 45 percent of the weight and 23 percent of the volume of current PS2s, and will sell for the same price—$149. The new PlayStation 2 retains almost all of the features of the previous model—it will play all the games, DVDs and music CDs, it's still backwards-compatible, and the online capabilities are built right in—although its smaller size will make it incompatible with the hard drive. In fact, Sony has revealed that they have no further plans to support the hard drive, so Final Fantasy XI fans will have to stick to older PS2 machines for their fix. To go along with the newly designed PS2, Sony will be releasing a new vertical system stand and new multitap as well.

A decade of Oddworld

They're not getting older; they're getting odder!



It's been 10 years already since Oddworld Inhabitants opened its doors, and to celebrate, Australian-based publisher Ballistic Publishing will be releasing an art book entitled The Art of Oddworld Inhabitants: The First Ten Years 1994 – 2004. The 256-page book covers every aspect of Oddworld's artistic development and vision in great depth, compiling a wealth of vivid imagery, including pre-production sketches, color drawings, renders, storyboards, game screens and CG stills. Three versions of the book will be available: a softcover priced at $49, a hardcover for $59 and leather-bound, gold-embossed limited edition going for $139 (limited to 1000 individually numbered copies). Since its founding, Oddworld Inhabitants has released three games—Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee, Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus and Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee—with their fourth game, Oddworld: Stranger, set for a 2005 release. To learn more about the art book, visit http://www.ballisticpublishing.com.

Phantom fades into 2005

Infinium Labs continues to make strides to bring its Phantom Game Service into gamers' homes—but it won't happen until early 2005, the company recently revealed. Infinium president Kevin Bachus cited requests from their business partners—retailers, marketing affiliates, game publishers—as the reason, as they'd prefer the PC-based console/games-on-demand service to come out at a time that avoids the unpredictable holiday season. November 18 was the previous target release date.

In the meantime, Infinium has lined up a respectable amount of content to be offered through the Phantom. More than 20 publishers—21-6 Productions, Atari, BraveTree, Chronic Logic, Codemasters, Dreamcatcher Interactive, eGames, Eidos, Enlight Interactive, Framework Studios, GamerBlitz, Gameware Development, GarageGames, Global Software Publishing, Kuma Reality Games, Legacy Interactive, Max Gaming, O~3 Entertainment, Riverdeep, Skunk Studios and VU Games—have all signed on to have their content distributed via Phantom, with a total of more than 500 games. Specific titles haven't been revealed, but the content is said to include some of the most popular PC games across all genres.

"Our agreements demonstrate that game publishers and developers are recognizing that digital distribution offers them a significant opportunity to expand sales in conjunction with the existing retail model. They're joining with us to promote market expansion," Bachus stated in a press announcement.

Joe TV...U.S. bound?

Viewtiful anime is imminent!

With its movie inspiration and brilliant cartoon aesthetic, Capcom's Viewtiful Joe has always seemed to be an ideal candidate for a jump to anime; now, thanks to Tokyo TV affiliates in Japan, the crossover has finally happened. The 52-episode series began airing Saturday mornings in early October, staying true to the source material and paying attention to recreate the characters and backgrounds with the same sense of style as the game. The series promises to offer movie satire as well as effects-laden action, and the full game cast, including Joe, Silvia, Captain Blue and the ludicrous crew of villains, will be featured as they do battle throughout Movie Land. Capcom execs have stated that they'd like the series come to the U.S., but nothing official has been yet announced.



Midway does Austin

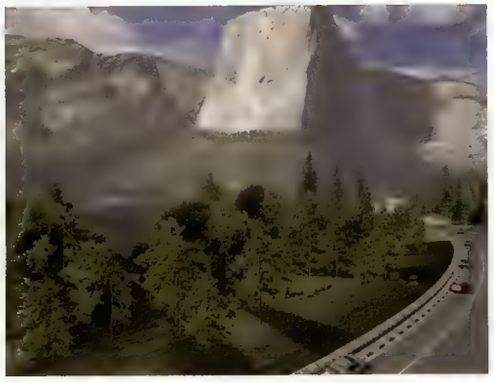
The house of Midway gets ever stronger...

Potentially exciting things are afoot in Austin, Texas, as Midway recently disclosed that the city would be home to their new game development studio. Recruitment for the studio began in early September, and, with the recent bankruptcy of Acclaim and subsequent closure of their Austin Studios, there are doubtlessly more than a few talented game designers looking for a new place of employment. High on the rumor-only list is that Midway is looking to bring in Warren Spector, known for his work on Deus Ex, to head up the division, should he leave the Eidos-owned Ion Storm. The Austin studio will be Midway's fourth base of operations, standing beside its headquarters in Chicago and development studios in San Diego and Seattle. Considering the fledgling nature of the studio, no hints have been dropped regarding potential projects; as long as they don't acquire the rights to a bunch of old has-been wrestlers, it's cool with us.

New direction for Gran Turismo 4

The good news: Gran Turismo 4 should finally see release on Dec. 14. The bad news: despite all the delays and all the hype, the game will not be online after all. Now get over it. Even though this heavily promoted aspect won't be making it in, Polyphony Digital still has a ridiculous amount of content planned for the game. The big new feature is a new Director Mode (otherwise known as "B-Spec," as opposed to the actual racing, dubbed "A-Spec," a la GT3's title). The Director Mode allows players to view the action from the dynamic replay perspectives and just manage their race team, giving direction to AI-controlled driver. This could be the ideal option for players who want to immerse themselves in GT4's amazing world but not deal with the super-realistic driving. Of course, this is in addition to Gran Turismo 4's previously announced Photo Mode (in which photos of the game's ultra-crisp vehicles and environments can be taken and then printed out on a USB printer), the returning Career Simulation and Arcade modes, more than 650 vehicles and 100 courses.





Top 20 publishers proclaimed

Original IPs score big in GDM's latest publishers study

When was the last time you went to watch a movie and were excited because it was a Paramount release? Not likely. One of the things that makes gaming an unusual medium is that publishers tend to possess specific, very defined track records; we often equate the name with the perceived quality. Classic companies like Nintendo, Sega, Capcom, Konami and Namco have tended to always to deliver fan-favorites, and their success in raw financial terms shows this. But if you had to make a truly objective list of who's really on top of the world of game production, where do you possibly begin? In the October issue of Game Developer magazine, the editors came up with a distinct system of their own, detailing the top 20 publishers in the industry. Last year the publication ranked publishers according to revenue alone. This year they dig much deeper for a more fascinating conclusion, based on an extensive amount of research into such areas as the number of original titles the publisher has released, overall critical review, developer relations, how many games are on the way, even how many were canceled. Interestingly, four publishers boast over $1 billion in revenue. While EA reigns supreme for the second year, they love licenses, with over 51 percent filling the slate. Sequels are big as always; as it turns out, Microsoft actually landed second behind Empire Interactive with 56 percent of its staple original ideas. After tallying an overall score, the following list is a brief look at the 20 publishers who made Game Developer's cut. Check out the full article, which will be on sale through November 12.

20. Namco / 19. Empire Interactive / 18. Koei / 17. Midway Games / 16. Square Enix / 15. Konami / 14. Sega / 13. Acclaim / 12. Codemasters / 11. Vivendi Universal Games / 10. Nintendo / 9. Atari / 8. Take 2 / 7. Activision / 6. Eidos / 5. Ubisoft / 4. THQ / 3. Sony Computer Entertainment / 2. Microsoft / 1. Electronic Arts

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
02	**THUG 2** activision / ps2, xb, gc
03	**Def Jam: Fight for NY** ea / ps2, xb, gc
04	**FIFA 2005** ea / ps2, xb, gc
05	**Star Wars: Battlefront** lucasarts / ps2, xb, pc
06	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005** ea / ps2, gc, xb
07	**Mortal Kombat: Deception** midway / ps2, xb
08	**X-Men Legends** activision / ps2, xb, gc
09	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2, xb, gc
10	**ESPN NBA 2K5** sega/global star / ps2, xb



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Aug. Game Sales

01	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2
02	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / xb
03	**ESPN NFL 2K5** sega/global star / ps2
04	**Madden NFL 2005 Collector's Edition** ea / ps2
05	**NCAA Football 2005** ea / xb
06	**Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow** ubisoft / xb
07	**Spider-Man 2** activision / ps2
08	**NCAA Football 2005** ea / ps2
09	**Halo** microsoft / xb
10	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / gc



Your Megastore Beckons!



ESPN NBA 2K5
sega/global star / ps2, xb

Basketball season never has to end! Pick up 2K5 and make your own magic. Play Kobe without feeling guilty!



ESPN NFL 2K5
sega/global star / ps2, xb

Madden or 2K5? Gotta have both, right? The price is right! And these players don't have nearly the injuries...



ESPN NHL 2K5
sega/global star / ps2, xb

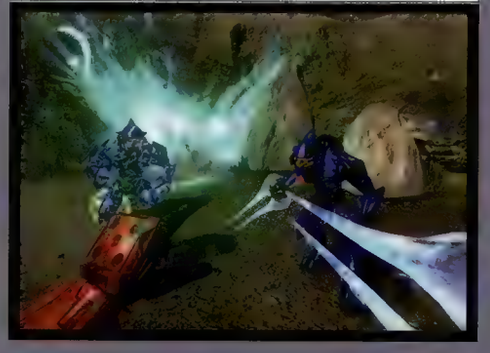
Beat each other's brains in without all the medical bills. Oh...and play some hockey too.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
02	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
03	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
04	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
05	**BloodRayne 2** majesco / xb



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Tork** ubisoft / xb
02	**Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders** microsoft / xb
03	**Fable** microsoft / xb
04	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC** bandai / ps2
05	**BloodRayne 2** majesco / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Fable** microsoft / xb
02	**The Bard's Tale** vu games / ps2
03	**Fatal Frame II: Director's Cut** tecmo / xb
04	**Neo Contra** konami / ps2
05	**Mortal Kombat: Deception** midway / ps2



Chris Hoffman anime editor

01	**Capcom Fighting Evolution** capcom / ps2
02	**Paper Mario: Thousand-Year Door** nintendo / gc
03	**Metroid Prime 2 Echoes** nintendo / gc
04	**WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw** thq / ps2
05	**Boktai 2: Solar Boy Django** konami / gba

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**FFXI Online: Chains of Promathia** square enix / pc
02	**Colin McRae 2005** codemasters / xb
03	**OutRun 2** microsoft / xb
04	**Star Wars: Battlefront** lucasarts / xb
05	**Neo Contra** konami / ps2

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**Call of Duty: United Offensive** activision / pc
02	**Tales of Symphonia** namco / gc
03	**Donkey Konga** nintendo / gc
04	**Dynasty Warriors 4: Empires** koei / ps2
05	**Gungrave: Overdose** mastiff / ps2


play games



Prince of Persia
Warrior Within

Words: Mike Griffin



After Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time earned a universally high approval rating, fans made it emphatically clear that they wanted a bigger and edgier sequel, and they wanted it soon. Ubisoft is responding in dramatic form, fulfilling this wish list and going completely beyond the scope of the original game in size, gameplay and attitude, and they're delivering the goods just one year after the release of the original.

How exactly did the Prince of Persia: Warrior Within team create a longer, more complex and action-packed game in literally half the time that was required to produce The Sands of Time? Thanks to the heroic efforts of a Montreal-based team so huge and dedicated it would likely put some small nations' armed forces to shame, if not in size than surely in discipline. We entered the thick of the fray just prior to the game's wrap-up, witnessing each department of the Warrior Within team on overdrive. Several section leaders, beaming with enthusiasm despite the insane hours they had been clocking in, welcomed us into the thick of their fine-tuning marathon to grand scope of development and explore deep into the game. So what's it like, journeying into the heart of the maelstrom, on the cusp of a future best-seller's release? Before we board that boat to the Island of Time, we must look to the past...



Doomed but determined

Only one year of development has elapsed, but the Prince has been a busy lad for over a decade between The Sands of Time and Warrior Within. The spry, bright-eyed son of a Maharaja from the original game is now a grizzled, tattooed, feral warrior of a man. What happened in 10 years to evoke such a dramatic change in our hero? Maybe the best answer involves what *didn't* happen, and why the Prince can never settle: he cheated death and tampered with time itself. As the Prince refused the Vizier's orders to return the dagger, subsequently releasing the sands from the hourglass and resisting death's embrace, the incarnation of fate, Dahaka, began its relentless pursuit to restore balance.

In the years following these events, with immortal Dahaka shadowing his every move, the Prince wanders the middle-eastern regions far and wide, taking part in wars with enemies of the kingdom and learning fighting techniques under the tutelage of ancient masters from many countries. The Prince quickly evolves into an expert swordsman and becomes a revered, efficient killer. It's not all high swashbuckling adventure, though: he is tortured by his past, knowing that his very essence is like a trail of fresh blood in death's unremitting hunt for finality. The Prince is eventually led to Babylon, where it is said that an old wiseman has the power to foresee his future. Although the Prince's fate is sealed, his debt to Dahaka irreversible, the old man tells him there might be a way to go back and prevent the release of the Sands. To do so, he must confront the Empress of the Island of Time. Following a tremulous set of directions, the Prince sets sail for the island with a shipload of adventuring companions. Unfortunately, his plans are brought to the Empress' attention, and she unleashes a scourge of minions—and her personal lieutenant, the fiery Shahdee—to intercept and destroy the Prince's ship on the high seas...

"...he is tortured by his past, knowing that his very essence is like a trail of fresh blood..."

Time and time again

And so the grim adventure surfaces on the Island of Time. The Prince will be making the journey across this strange alternate plane solo, without the assistance of a travel companion as he had with Farah in The Sands of Time. However, this doesn't mean he is without allies, and the Empress certainly has her detractors—beings who are aware of the Prince's intent. Among them, the slave Kileena will emerge and offer recurring information and assistance. Expect multiple unfriendly visits from the ruthless seductress Shahdee as well. As you might imagine, the island itself doesn't always adhere to the rules of time. The Prince will occasionally travel through rifts, into the past. The action you experience inside these parallel histories will be visible later as you return to the future and witness updated versions of the same environments, scarred with debris and other evidence of battle. Very often, the changes you've instigated through time travel will provide a significant gameplay advantage in the future, taking the fate-changing theme of the series one step further.

The concept of manipulating the past is old hat for the Prince, and he hasn't lost the ability to take command of brief increments of time using the last relic from The Sands of Time, the medallion. The space-warping rewind, slow motion and fast-forward powers are back, though the rules have changed slightly for each in Warrior Within. With slow motion, for example, the medallion will decelerate the entire universe to a crawl, but the Prince will continue at full speed, impervious to the effects of time as he proceeds into the next melee flurry or acrobatic sequence. These improved time powers have been integrated into the gameplay on a more fundamental level, as encounters, both large and small, are often designed with certain powers in mind. We witnessed close combat later in the game against some of the Empress' elite cursed soldiers where the odds were clearly a bit too overwhelming, and with a short burst of medallion slow-mo, the tide turned in our favor; the resulting crowd control session was very intense. And where the Prince was able to tap sand from enemies and Sand Fields with his dagger in the first game, in the sequel he'll have to fetch the short-lived sparkly stuff as it releases from recently slain foes. While this sounds simple in theory, remember that combat is a whole different animal in Warrior Within. Deciding if it's worth breaking off from an opponent to collect sand and feed the medallion in the heat of battle can be a critical choice. You never know when you might need to call upon your time powers to take charge of an encounter.

Weapons fit for a Prince

Although it's built on a foundation of great platforming, some of the best moments in Prince of Persia: Warrior Within involve intense combat. Ten years of fighting wars and outlaws have transformed the Prince into a Jet Li-style action whirlwind, and Ubisoft has given him some *extremely* satisfying new abilities and tools to dispatch enemies. The







Model integrity in line with the Prince's has seeped into every character and beast in the game.

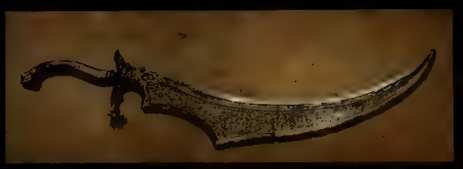
core gameplay designers acknowledged that the first game had a couple of exploitable power attacks that trivialized most enemy AI, so they've added a massive combo system to the sequel and equipped their new bad guys with unique moves and team tactics. Enemies like the Bladedancer will attempt to backstab and poison the Prince, while the swarming Spike Beasts will surround him and synchronize waves of leaping attacks. The new combo system is based on a dual-weapon melee model that features a staggering arsenal of 50-plus completely unique swords, axes, daggers, maces and more. Each weapon type has a series of attributes, such as durability, speed and, most importantly, a unique subset of combos. The rarely seen Fortune weapons, like the Eagle Sword, will have powerful innate effects, such as life leeching and distinctive combos and finishers. Loaded with deep technique, counter-attacks and nuances designed to penetrate the defenses of certain enemy types, Warrior Within's weapon combat system is definitely befitting the master swordsman that the Prince has become.

Adding the final touches

With so many weapons to acquire in Warrior Within, there are many ways to stay armed and dangerous. The Prince can lift a weapon off the ground with a flick of his foot, scoop one from a nearby weapon rack or snatch one right out of the grasp of most enemies. This is a stronger, fiercer Prince, and he comes equipped with a grab move in Warrior Within, allowing him to strangle and throw foes (into chasms, walls, spikes and each other) or pilfer their weapons. If you notice an opponent wielding a special weapon type you'd love to get a hold of, you can ditch your current off-hand weapon by tossing it at an enemy. Not content with providing a simple throwing play mechanic, Ubisoft has also given each weapon its own unique projectile characteristics. While a normal axe might simply damage on impact, the deadly Abathur Dagger may remove a body part, and certain thrown swords will stun or paralyze an enemy once embedded in their chest. At the heart of these elements, the combo system will start to link off each basic move: a side roll into a grab, linked to a strangle and throw, followed by a vicious thrown scimitar, or perhaps a vaulting flip, linked to a weapon steal and body slice. And if it's too crowded to administer that much TLC to one enemy, a huge array of free-form weapon combos will keep the damage output rolling through the mob until an opportunity for intimate punishment presents itself. Finally, if you weaken one enemy enough, you'll notice their color tone will change; this indicates that they are now vulnerable to a finishing move. From neck-popping decapitations with gouts of stylish, yet unrestrained arterial spray that Mr. Tarantino might approve of to full body-halving overhead chops that reinforce the adage "divided we fall," these finishers make the

The Armory

With over 50 unique weapons available throughout the game, some will certainly be more difficult to find than others. Here are a few uncommonly useful weapons:



Eagle Sword **Very Rare**
There are only seven in the entire game. This main-hand sword offers devastating power.



Vidatu Axe **Rare**
Very high damage output. The low speed of this axe offsets its crushing power.



Menog Mace **Rare**
Unbalances opponents. Strong attacks with this mace will knock foes to the ground.



Fravashis Sword **Uncommon**
Curses the wielder. This off-hand sword is finely balanced for speed and power.



Abathur Dagger **Uncommon**
Can be fatal when thrown. This dagger is blindingly fast but has a short melee reach.

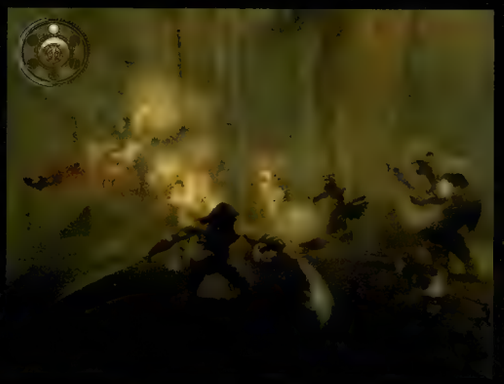
combat in the first game seem altogether tame.

A nod to the past...and to the ninja

If we re-visit Jordan Mechner's vision of the Prince of Persia series, we underline the creator's focus on character action, precise navigation and cinematic sensibilities. Warrior Within honors these traditions, taking each facet further than most titles in the action-adventure genre dare to attempt. The Prince certainly has more raw combat moves, but it's his ability to use the environment as an offensive attack tool that really elevates him above the norm. You can swing around pillars and ladders, gathering momentum before launching off and pounding into the abdomen of nearby foes. Ropes aren't just devices designed to cross expanses now; while clinging to one, the Prince can arc its trajectory and whiplash into the path of enemies with a potent impact. In addition to springing off railings, triangle jumping and tiptoeing across thin beams, you'll also be able to slide down cloth banners, weapons dug deep into the fabric. You don't need these props to defy gravity, however. The Prince's wall-running abilities have reached an explosive apex in the sequel, now fully integrated into his offensive repertoire, adding huge aerial flips and diving sword slashes from high above. If that sounds a little overpowering, this detail might change your mind: in Warrior Within, many enemies have been given their own wall-running abilities. One scene, which Ubisoft designers have unofficially dubbed "The Joust," has the Prince staring down a thief from across a large gap. When you begin your wall run, he does the same. Halfway across the pit, you clash. The loser plummets to his doom on the spikes below, possibly without a head, while the winner lands gracefully on the opposite edge. All told, it looks like the Prince took a page out of Ryu Hayabusa's training manual...and then decided he'd already written the book.

Running and cunning

Amid all this action goodness, Warrior Within's approach to traps will frequently require less patience, and more finesse, to carry on unscathed. You'll still find the ubiquitous rotating blades, pillars and spikes, but the complexity has increased.



Gets the orchestra in your head going, doesn't it?

Interviews



Producer
Bertrand Helias
Profile Previously an award-winning GBA game producer

"...we were pushing every aspect of the game, just to reach the absolute limit of technology..."

play: What was it like, from a producer's standpoint, creating a major title in just one year?
Bertrand Helias: This short production period for such a big project was definitely a good challenge. I'm not sure we would do this again, but who knows. We were responding to a very enthusiastic public. It's incredible, though: the Warrior Within team doesn't need any prodding; they are a team that pushes themselves. We worked in extreme conditions and we had to deliver everything in the same time frame as often as possible. Meanwhile, we were pushing every aspect of the game, just to reach the absolute limit of technology. From the first day, the team wanted to create a sequel that was better than the original.

Every developer wants to raise the bar with a sequel, that's a given, but when the original is such a success, surely you try to re-visit some of its best elements?
The core team that worked on Warrior Within's conception was also part of the original game, so they had a lot of knowledge about the technology and the details that worked well or needed some improvement. Since we didn't start from scratch this time, we could actually try a lot of stuff with the Prince early on in unfinished levels, as the basic gameplay was already there. With this approach, we kept everything that made Sands of Time a great game, and built the sequel up from there.

With the core elements intact, did it make it easier for you to steer the franchise down a darker path?
In fact, we chose to go that direction simply to provide players with something really different. We could have easily given players a Sands of Time sequel, with the same types of environments and dangers, but we didn't do that. A good way to make a big difference, at least from a visual standpoint, was to go the darker route. And we all knew the Prince would have a much different attitude after the first game, so considering the full measure of our design, the mature change was a logical choice.

This gritty attitude has definitely infused the combat with a much fiercer, free form style. What did you feel was missing from the original game's combat?
One of the big points during conception was the need to improve combat. For The Sands of Time, the combat worked very well, but players started to tell us it was lacking diversity. Some players enjoyed using the same key moves over and over, but most wanted more combat variety. During the time between games, the Prince did a lot of fighting and learned many combat abilities, so it felt natural to add a lot of combos, many different weapons, and several vicious ways to dispatch your enemies. It's a dark theme now, and we make sure this feeling is consistent throughout the game, even in combat.

In terms of raw content and duration, compared to the first game, can players expect a bigger game with Warrior Within?
The comments we received were fairly divided regarding the length of the first game: some felt it was too short, others said it was too long. We decided with our greater variety of gameplay it was an important objective to make the game longer than the first one, but we're also introducing different difficulty levels to be sure that most players can experience the story itself. We don't want you missing out on the story because you're "not good enough," so it will be up to the player which difficulty they want to challenge. Based on difficulty setting, we change aspects of time, enemy strength, numbers...and rewards.

As development winds down and you have a release day in sight, what kind of stuff is your team doing?
Quite simply, everybody is pushing to get the perfect control, the perfect animation and the perfect graphics... some of them are looking at details you can't even imagine. They want people to like this game. Besides a good vacation, the biggest reward for the team will be a positive response from gamers.



Lead Level Designer
Pier-Luc Papineau
Profile Member of original level design team on PoP: Sands of Time

"It's really important to create a good rhythm and balance between navigation and combat."

play: As a level designer on the first PoP game, you developed an intimate knowledge of this gameplay. What sort of technical experience are you bringing to the table as the lead level designer on Warrior Within?
Pier-Luc Papineau: Pretty much all the technical requirements that we aimed for with PoP: WW, I got to grips with in the first game. Dynamic loading, for example—I was one of the designers who understood the implications of this new streaming technology very well and how to make it seamless and invisible. Also, right from the start, I had a good understanding of what Prince of Persia should be,

Where spike grates previously required soft walking to bypass, in some cases they've been upgraded to devious "Spike Lines" that spring just seconds after you step over top. As the name suggests, rows of spikes will trigger in long chain reactions that force you to flee down narrow halls at top speed—a flood of pain in your wake. In an interesting twist, the Prince will now have a chance to take control of traps himself, luring enemies into a danger zone to skewer them on spikes with a carefully timed tap of a pressure plate. It seems only fitting, with so many new ways to get injured, that the Fountains of Life now provide double the functionality of the first game, combining health restoration *and* the save game system into one handy little basin of enchanted water.

Production values to die for

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within features one of the most impressive presentations of any game in the genre. The updated engine draws lavish environments with ease on all platforms, using a more effective dynamic loading system that produces a steady stream of detailed architecture. As we've witnessed in the Splinter Cell games (past and future), Ubisoft Montreal's artists are among gaming's finest when it comes to employing lighting and texture to create an enthralling film-like atmosphere, and the darker, era-blending fantasy theme of the Island of Time has inspired a great deal of creativity and sophistication in Warrior Within's visual style. From mythical ruins to dense, softly lit gardens, up through the massive gears and chains of the Mechtower, the Prince's new playground dwarfs the first game in size and variety—and this is no small feat. Musically, Warrior Within welcomes the return of keyboardist Stuart Chatwood of rock band Tea Party. At the band's live shows, the three-person group is famous for creating deeper sound than bands twice their size, and it's Stuart's remarkable layering of strings and Indian tablas and sitars that elicits such reactions. He's toned down the middle-eastern flavor slightly for Warrior Within, pursuing the game's brooding aura with harder guitars and atmospheres, but his penchant for intense melodic rhythms continues to drive the action forward.

A noble achievement

Ubisoft tacked a one-year objective onto the Warrior Within project, and they decided to up the ante on the first game's design at every opportunity—a plan most developers wouldn't dream of committing to, let alone executing so fully. From the overhauled weapon combat system to all new environmental tricks and traps—even a new Xbox Live time attack mode—the game simply does more, and with a fiercer attitude that permeates every pixel. Of all the multi-platform action-adventure titles available this fall, Prince of Persia: Warrior Within should be near the top of any gamer's must-have list. With hints of the third installment appearing on next-generation consoles, the Prince will remain a royal powerhouse...that is, if he can defy fate itself.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: November

according to the vision of everyone on the team. This is probably why they gave me the mandate to lead the level design team for the sequel.

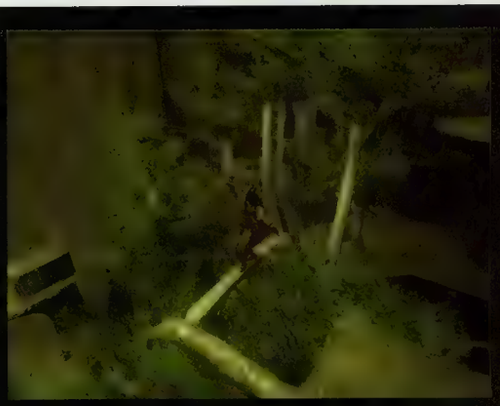
There's a much greater emphasis on combat this time around, for a number of reasons. Is it your call to decide where and how many enemies get placed in certain locations, in any given level?
Yeah, that's my call. It's really important to create a good rhythm and balance between navigation and combat. This requires a lot of forward thinking, to make sure we mix them both together in a seamless kind of way, so it feels natural to the PoP 2 player. We plan ahead and make sure there's enough free space at intervals to add some good fights, so the player doesn't get stuck doing any one type of gameplay for too long.

The architecture in The Sands of Time was primarily used for exploration and acrobatics, with limited combat interaction. In Warrior Within, the Prince has a slew of wild off-the-wall combat moves. How does this affect the way you design environments?
We had the go-ahead to plan much of the architectural aspects of the game. Warrior Within is a game where level design drives a lot of other choices, and stuff like combat is seen from this point of view. So even before the modeling team takes control of a map, we give it a strong core architecture that leaves room for gameplay opportunities like special combat moves. There's also a level design aspect to bosses and other enemies now, like assassins—who also walk on the walls.

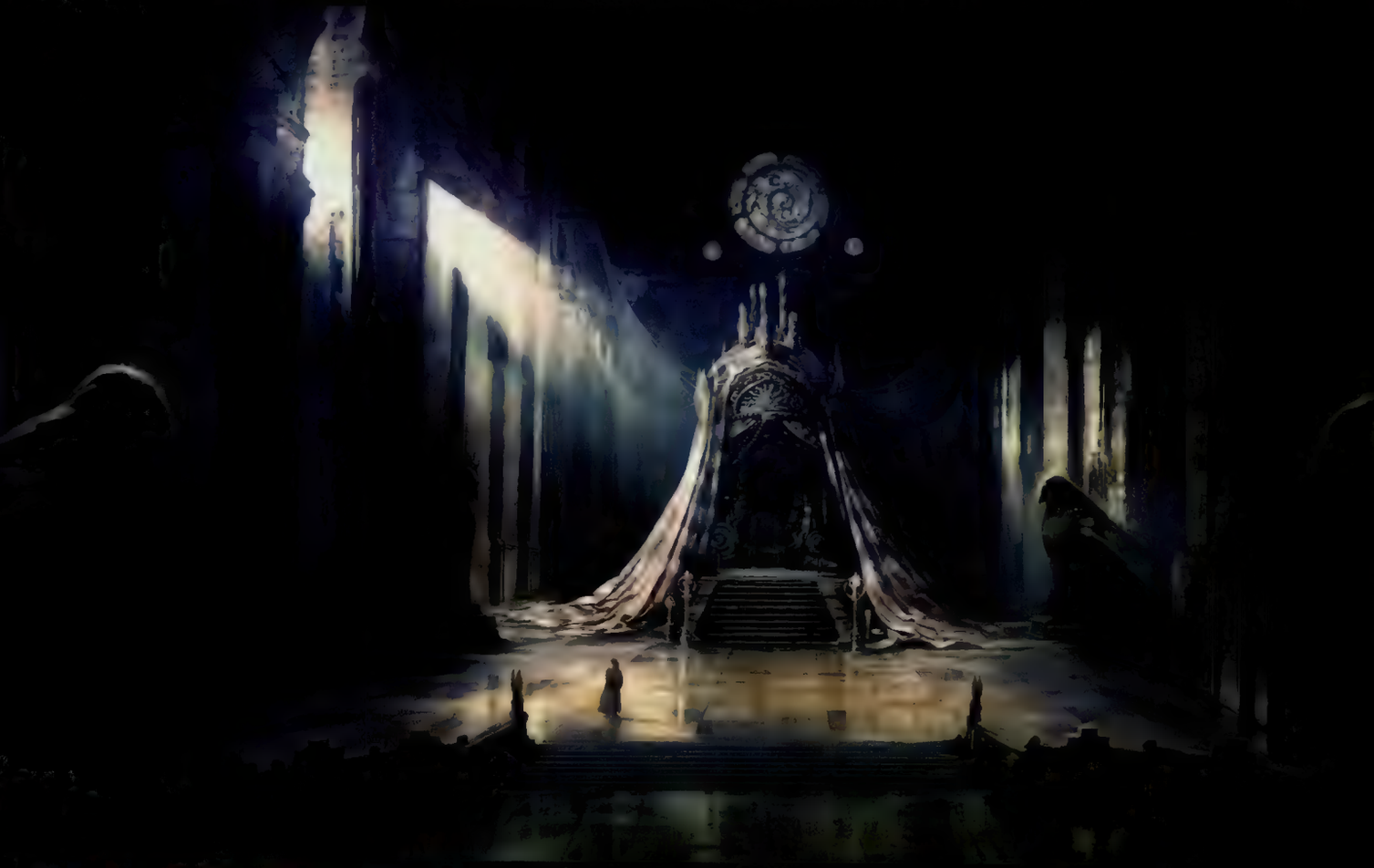
The contemporary Prince of Persia titles are very dependent on a good camera. How deep a consideration is the camera when you're designing these levels?
The camera in our Prince of Persia titles requires a certain amount of "tension" to generate a sense of mood and place. And everyone knows you don't want incredibly tight spaces where the camera can't function properly. Both of these issues stay at the forefront of our planning when designing levels.

The way you give shape to this big sandbox has a pretty big effect on the difficulty of the game. With this in mind, is Warrior Within a tougher game than the original?
Sure, at first glance, it might look a bit more difficult. There's just more to do. We also have a whole selection of difficulty settings in there, so you can pick something closer to your skill.

You have to admit, it sure opens with a bang...
[Laughs] Yeah, we open up pretty big. I'd call it an emotional peak rather than a difficulty peak though. We wanted to give players a big emotional boost at the beginning of the game, so they feel implicated in the PoP: ß story and environment right away. We actually try to provide a good emotional spike every 10 to 15 minutes, with more cool sequences, more bosses and more surprises.









Artistic Director
Mickael Labat
Profile Previously lead artist on the Nightmare Creatures titles

"We wanted an evolved character, physically, and with a deeper and darker emotional core."

play: You had just one year to build Prince of Persia: Warrior Within, after having almost three years to develop the original game. How did this time frame affect your work?
Mickael Labat: We went into PoP: WW having worked out all the major technological details of the engine ahead of time. Obviously this is a fairly lengthy process, so it made a big difference for us. It was a much less complicated and time-consuming way to start the project compared to the original, and we were able to jump right into graphics creation. The schedule was a good test, and we passed it.



The most common adjective being applied to PoP: WW's new direction is "darker." And perhaps more than any crew on the team, the efforts of the art department reinforce that perception. How did you take the visuals down this new path?
Part of the idea was to separate the Prince himself from his bright "middle-eastern royalty" background, as he's suffered during his adventures between games and killed many people. This lent itself to a more Gothic-looking character style, and we chose to use tight leather armor, both to evoke his agility and fearlessness and to hint at wounds beneath. We wanted an evolved character, physically, and with a deeper and darker emotional core. Once we achieved that separation, it had a ripple effect on every other element of design.

The Sands of Time was rooted in ancient middle-eastern inspired locales, whereas the sequel now takes place on the Island of Time. Can we presume you had a great deal more freedom to try new architectural designs?
We gathered inspiration from multiple eras this time. We incorporated some ancient oriental aesthetic that had a decidedly middle-ages theme of design, alongside Mesopotamian-style castle designs. We had the liberty to wrap this up in a rather fantastical Gothic setting, almost film-like in its treatment, similar to the *Lord of the Rings*' architectural sensibility.

The Sands of Time was a big hit among casual gamers, in part due to its mystical environments and the relationship between characters. Do you think the darker setting, and this cold and detached Prince, will turn off some players?
Who knows, really? We certainly had a degree of violence in the first game, with the traps. The lighter, magical side has been toned down in the shadow of the new theme, but perhaps casual gamers will also enjoy chopping off heads and eviscerating monsters?

From an artistic standpoint, how are you using the advantages of certain hardware platforms to maximize the Warrior Within experience?
It's been different compared to the first game, where the differences between the PS2 and Xbox weren't too dramatic, apart from certain superior textures. This time we pushed the Xbox hardware, improving the characters and taking advantage of bump and normal mapping to add a very interesting quality to some environments. We could attempt similar effects on PS2, but it really eats into the memory and speed, so we improved other areas.

It's quite conceivable that the next Prince of Persia game will land on next-generation consoles. What kind of approach to graphics do you think we can expect in the future?
It's difficult to predict, but certain directions seem to be quite clear. We have Doom 3, for example, where we see the potential of intense and realistic lighting effects. Personally, I think we could achieve the same quality, but with even more characters and interaction on screen. The next step will definitely add that type of dimension. I'm not a huge fan of pure photo-realism in games, however. I find it really cool when there are several small realistic elements, but with a fantastical edge—sort of like the Metal Gear Solid games. There's a lot more freedom that way, and we tend to follow this paradigm with the Prince of Persia games.

Cinematic Action



Director of phototgraphy
Remi Lacoste
Profile Previously lead camera artist, Myst Revelation

play: The new free-form acrobatic combat and finishing moves in Warrior Within must be especially challenging for camera direction...

Remi Lacoste: For sure! The player can do stuff like dash up walls and flip 15 meters into the air and strike down, and it all has to be tracked. With the big finishing moves, we employed a slow motion close-up effect similar to the technique used in the first game. We've made some changes to accommodate the finishing moves, however. To keep the intensity level high, we wait until the very last enemy of a set to launch into a cinematic slow motion effect for a finisher. We have a lot of cool camera events and this time we make sure the Prince's gameplay stays in focus.



Lead Sound Designer
Jonathan Pilon
Profile Worked on the first PoP and the Rogue Spear titles

"...what worked best for us were big oranges. They're really juicy, so it's great for head-slicing material."

play: As a member of the original Sands of Time sound team, what technology or influences did you bring to the Warrior Within project to help with production?
Jonathan Pilon: One of the biggest benefits for me is that we're using the same engine with some new features, and this helps with a lot of details—from music to effects and voice integration. We've actually re-used a very small part from the first game's sound, consisting of some character movement stuff for the Prince, but otherwise everything is brand new. The direction of the sound theme is also totally new; this is a darker atmosphere and a darker Prince.

What sort of thematic considerations come into play when you're making the transition to a "darker" vibe for the sequel?
Basically we had to create a stronger, more chilling feeling overall. In terms of music, there's a lot more content compared to Sands of Time, and we've carefully chosen two types of music depending on what's going on. The action and fight sequences will cue a harder metal rock, and we have these rich atmospheric rhythms while you're in exploration mode.

The Sands of Time soundtrack had that really cool Indian-meets-rock style, and it totally suited the era and architecture. Have you incorporated a similar hybrid sound in the sequel?
We consciously went for a more rock approach, but actually this is the same composer as the original game: Stuart Chatwood, from the rock band Tea Party. They're a really great band. Part of the reason why we approached them for Sands of Time was that we knew they loved the Indian-rock hybrid sound, and since Stuart did such a kick-ass job on the first, we knew he was *the one* for PoP: WW.

How early in the project was Stuart able to see concept material?
We gave him everything possible as we moved ahead with certain ideas. We got him videos, sketches, storyboards, and scripts. We made it pretty clear we were pursuing this dark direction. So you'll still hear the Arabic melody this time, but it's subtler than before, and in its place we go a little heavy on rock and deep atmospheres.

Regarding sound effects, what's the biggest change in the sequel?
The foley sounds are definitely bloodier. The Prince has a lot of new moves that will have enemy body parts flying.

In the movies, the foley guys use some pretty interesting material for their gory sounds, like busting open heads of lettuce. Do you use similar techniques?
Oh yeah, I really believe in organic sounds. We had lettuce, but actually what worked best for us were big oranges [laughs]. They're really juicy, so it's great for head-slicing material. Cabbage was good for skin-shearing sounds, and for breaking bones we snapped a big handful of pasta in half. As you might imagine, Warrior Within is going to be much more raw than the first game.

Regarding character voices, we were a little surprised to hear a different Prince this time around. Was there a specific reason for this casting change?
We wanted him to carry a more mature persona in the sequel compared to The Sands of Time, so we went with a new voice actor. The Prince is the only character remaining from the first game, he's around 10 years older now, and he has a darker attitude. Hell, he even has a beard and tattoos!

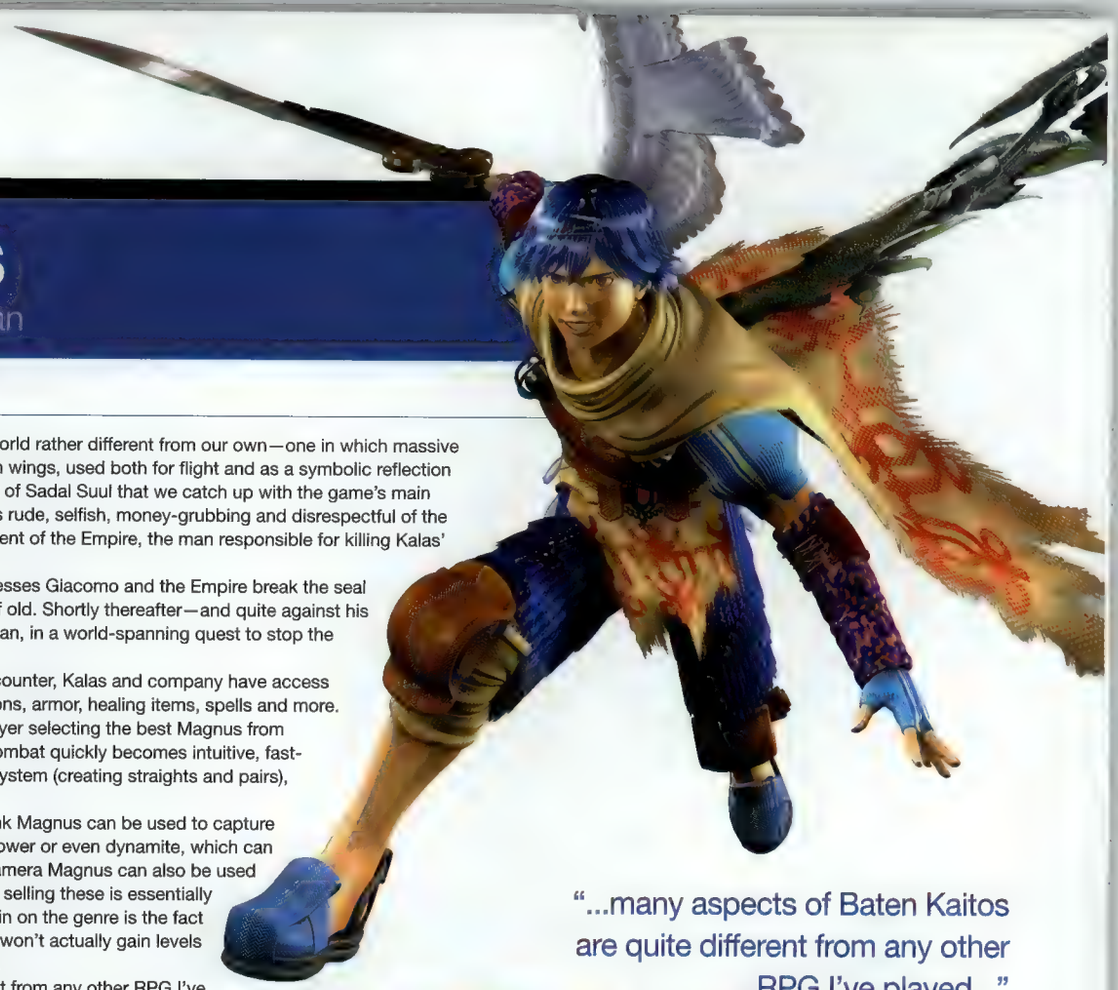
Yes, he's a rather grizzled and bitter fellow now. Maybe in the next game he'll be a crotchety old man who yells at kids and attacks with a cane.
[laughs]

Anyway, the Prince has some killer new abilities, and his enemies have a lot more personality in combat. What role does sound play in this?
The enemies we have in PoP 2 are much different from the previous game, and we have a lot more sound for every enemy, including some speech. Some enemies might threaten the Prince in the middle of combat, and he'll answer right back, or they'll talk amongst each other, giving the impression that they're coordinating their moves and attacks against the Prince. The action and combat is much more complex now, and we try to reinforce the enemies' skill and intelligence.

Finally, for the gaming sound connoisseurs, what type of output support can we expect for the different versions?
We're offering the same support as with the original game, and it sounds awesome. For PS2 and GameCube, we have Dolby Pro Logic, and for Xbox we have Dolby Digital. On PC we have Dolby Digital and EAX. **play**

Baten Kaitos

Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean



It's in the cards

Namco's latest RPG, Baten Kaitos, takes place in a world rather different from our own—one in which massive continents float in the sky and humans are born with wings, used both for flight and as a symbolic reflection of what's in their hearts. It's on the frontier continent of Sadal Suul that we catch up with the game's main character, Kalas, a rather unlikable young wanderer. Kalas is rude, selfish, money-grubbing and disrespectful of the dead; he also has a well-justified hatred for Giacomo, an agent of the Empire, the man responsible for killing Kalas' grandfather two years prior.

It's Kalas' vendetta that gets him into trouble, as he witnesses Giacomo and the Empire break the seal on the ancient evil known as Malpercio, a malevolent god of old. Shortly thereafter—and quite against his wishes—he finds himself joining Xelha, a heroic young woman, in a world-spanning quest to stop the Empire.

To battle the Imperial forces and other creatures they encounter, Kalas and company have access to Magnus cards, which contain the embodiments of weapons, armor, healing items, spells and more. Though the system initially seems complicated, with the player selecting the best Magnus from the available hand on both offensive and defensive turns, combat quickly becomes intuitive, fast-paced and multi-layered thanks to a poker-inspired bonus system (creating straights and pairs), elemental attributes and powerful combo finishers.

Magnus aren't just for fighting either. In lieu of items, blank Magnus can be used to capture the essences of various objects, such as water, a delicate flower or even dynamite, which can then be used for various purposes in certain situations. A camera Magnus can also be used in battle to create cards featuring the enemies encountered; selling these is essentially the only way to earn money in the game. Another unique spin on the genre is the fact that while characters accrue experience while fighting, they won't actually gain levels without going to a church to pray and reflect on their deeds.

Although many aspects of Baten Kaitos are quite different from any other RPG I've played, the game is taking an aesthetic cue from a generation of RPGs gone by—the backgrounds in Baten Kaitos are prerendered. Seeing this 32-bit convention make a comeback is a bit jarring, but it does permit a high level of detail in the scenery, and amazing animations bring the backdrops to life—waving fields of grain, fountains of rippling water, curtains of light, some of the most impressive clouds ever seen in a video game.

Early impressions indicate that Baten Kaitos might not be quite on par with Namco's more high-profile RPGs like Xenosaga, but its combination of vibrant visuals and innovative gameplay should still prove rewarding. At the very least, BK will be another GameCube-exclusive RPG for the Nintendo faithful. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Monolith Software/Tri-Crescendo
Publisher: Namco
Available: November

"...many aspects of Baten Kaitos are quite different from any other RPG I've played..."









The intricately detailed backgrounds are reminiscent of some of the best Final Fantasy games.

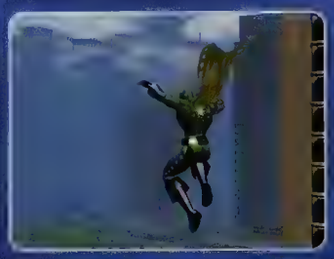
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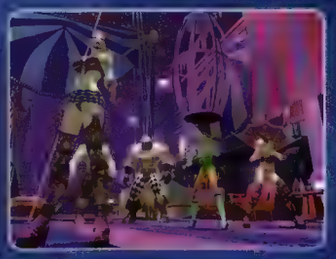
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Destroy All Humans

The invasion has begun!





He's short, he's grey, he's kinda pissed off, and he crash-landed on Earth some 50 years ago. His name is Cryptosporidium-137, and he's an alien with a mission: to pluck the brains out of mankind so they can be used as genetic material for the cloning—and thus the continued existence—of the Furon race. Other games have let you play as the bad guy before, but Destroy All Humans, with its '50s-era setting and tongue-in-cheek gameplay, seems poised to take it to a brand new level.

Taking a conceptual cue from the Grand Theft Auto games, Destroy All Humans provides players with significantly open-ended gameplay, but with an extra-terrestrial twist, of course. Although Cryptosporidium-137 (so named because he's the 136th clone of his original form) begins the game in captivity and stripped of his weapons, he still has numerous mental abilities he can use to his advantage: Psychokinesis for hurling objects (or people) through the sky, the Holobob, which lets Crypto manipulate people's minds into thinking he's a human, and three mind-probe powers, encompassing the Cortex Scan (for reading minds), the Hypno Blast (to control people's actions) and the self-explanatory Brain Extractor. Once he breaks free and finds them, Crypto also has access to a number of otherworldly weapons, including the non-lethal Zap-O-Matic, the Ion Detonator and the Disintegrator Ray. And while there aren't going to be any carjackings here, Crypto will be able to get into his UFO craft at any time (after he reacquires it from the authorities) to rain fiery death upon the anti-alien secret agents known as the G-Men, not to mention humanity as a whole.

As Crypto extracts cerebella from the unsuspecting populace, he'll journey through environments based upon well-known alien hotspots like Roswell and Area 51, as well as iconic elements of 1950s Americana, from farmlands to suburbs to capital cities. The resulting chaos just might spell the end of the world as gamers know it—which in this case would be a good thing. Read on for more info on the creation of Destroy All Humans. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Pandemic
Publisher: THQ
Available: Q1 2005





"...Destroy All Humans provides players with significantly open-ended gameplay, but with an extra-terrestrial twist, of course."

The county fair makes a fine setting for wreaking violent alien havoc

play: First things first: where did the idea for Destroy All Humans originate, and how long have you been working on it?
Brendan Andrews: We found the idea in a cereal box that had been buried in a time capsule in a couple of years' time. Apparently there is some sort of time-space vortex under the office. It's really quite annoying, not least because they've just put the rent up. It sucks—literally. Of course, the game came from the really bad '50s science fiction movies, the ones where you can almost see them looking at palm cards or for a cue off-screen. Big banners across the screen proclaiming the end of the world at the hands of aliens!

What else has influenced you in the creation of the game? Obviously you're big sci-fi fans, especially considering the E.T. homage and the Plan 9 From Outer Space reference. Did any other games influence you?
I don't think any other games have intentionally influenced us in any major sense. Of course, the effect of the good ones finds its way in [in] many and varied ways. One thing we steadfastly refused was having Crypto (the Furon you play) carjack. I'm reasonably confident that has been done a few times already… But we've definitely been influenced by a range of sci-fi—from the past and present.

Why set the game in the 1950s instead of the present?
Partially because of the original movie inspiration, but there are a couple of other reasons. Firstly, the '50s offers greater scope for more atmosphere: in the era itself, the film styles of the day, the technology and buildings, people and even fashion. More importantly though: the population is an exaggeration of the paranoia of the period, quite separate from "now." You're in another place. We like to say that the people of this era totally have it coming!

And did you do any research for the era and settings? Did this pose any unique challenges for the development team, being based in Australia?
The only real difficulty I had was being abducted upside down. Though apparently they tell me the south is the top of the planet where they come from, so when they take over you're all going to have to invert your maps (ha!). Oh—and they don't have American accents either, so your casting has been all wrong. If anything, I think they sound a little like they're from Fiji. But they don't have a tan, or hair (the Fijian part is just about the voice—OK?). So you can see we've done serious research. We also used this really cool thing we have down in Australia called the Internet™®. I understand they're thinking of letting you all have access to it soon. We found a lot of stuff on it about the '50s—some of it from America, so presumably there has already been a security breach.

Tell me about the title, Destroy All Humans. As I understand it, the Furon aliens are on Earth to harvest brains. Is there something that makes them decide to destroy all humans, or does it just come with the territory?
Well the title is more thematically rather than factually correct. This is all about marketing. I don't know if you realize this, but you know that Final Fantasy is now into its two-billionth sequel…they'll really have to lose the roman numerals soon, because I don't think they ever had a reason to count that high. The title is atmospheric—representing the era, B-movie inspiration and exaggeration. But it's a fair point that Furons aren't fond of humans. They don't tolerate fools gladly and see humans as we see bugs on a windshield.

How would you describe the main character, Cryptosporidium-137? What's the significance of his name? (That's a diarrhea-causing parasite, isn't it?)
We call him Crypto for short—oh, it doesn't mean short, although he isn't tall… Anyway, that's his name. Maybe his parents were gastroenterologists? He is a clone, and the Furons can no longer reproduce normally (well, normally for *them*…). The gene pool is so depleted that they can only clone existing Furons. The Crypto you play is the 136th clone of the original, and no less patient than the original. You are here to harvest DNA from the humans' brains—because humans were seeded with Furon DNA thousands of years ago, and now you need it.

What kinds of tasks will Crypto have to accomplish on Earth, and how will he accomplish them?
The types of missions you have involve gathering information, destroying things (no big surprise there!) and infiltration. You can use the UFO, your supernatural abilities, weaponry and jetpack.

How open-ended will the gameplay be? Will there be multiple ways to get through missions, with optional tasks and that sort of thing?
The sites the game plays through are large and freely explorable. You'll find things off the mission paths and, although there is an ideal way to complete missions, there is always more than one option.

How limited will the use of Crypto's powers be? Will players be able to go nuts and start mind-controlling or levitating everyone in sight, or get in the ship and start blasting everything, or will there be restrictions on his powers?
The player can do whatever he likes—but there are always implications. If you jump into the middle of an intersection and start tossing people around, you'll draw attention, a reaction from the authorities, and suddenly you're in trouble when you find you can't just toss people around without limit. There are certainly times and places where you can go postal though. But often you need to find how you can get away with what you want to do and still complete the mission.

And there's a stealth aspect to the game also, correct? Is it challenging to balance between the stealthy and action-oriented aspects of gameplay?
I suppose it is challenging, but it is more fun too. It opens up the possibilities and gives you more tools to play with. Just to explain the powers that Crypto has: first of all, he can use his mind to fool people around him into thinking he isn't an alien. This he does by assuming the appearance of someone he gets close to. The other principal power is Psychokinesis, which is just great fun! As well as picking up people and swinging them, you can also focus your powers on one object and exert a concentrated force to "push" it away. Associated with the probe capability are some other abilities: you can read minds and place thoughts into them.

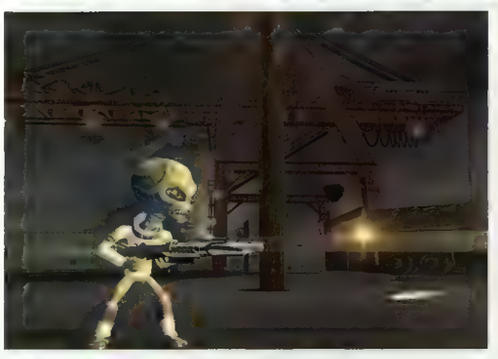
Speaking of probing…Crypto doesn't have an anal probe in his arsenal, does he?
That's an interesting choice of words. He does, yes. Our testers don't sit too comfortably since it was implemented.

Being able to jump in the ship and seamlessly transition from being within an environment to flying above it, looking down upon everything, is definitely cool. Did you have to use any technological tricks to be able to do this?
A huge amount of planning, technical challenge and work went into this—yes. Being able to not only see but affect things from the sky or standing in front of them are completely different requirements. But it's well worth it.

Finally, what's the single craziest or funniest element that's been implemented into the game so far?
I think we all had a ball when we first picked up people using PK (oh—Psychokinesis). One of my favorite things is still that—and you can do it with the UFO's Abducto Beam too. Make the people scream and then toss them into the water. It seems people in the '50s weren't very good swimmers, and we have accurately reproduced that. **play**

"They don't tolerate fools gladly and see humans as we see bugs on a windshield."

-Brendan Andrews
head of studio, Pandemic Studios Australia

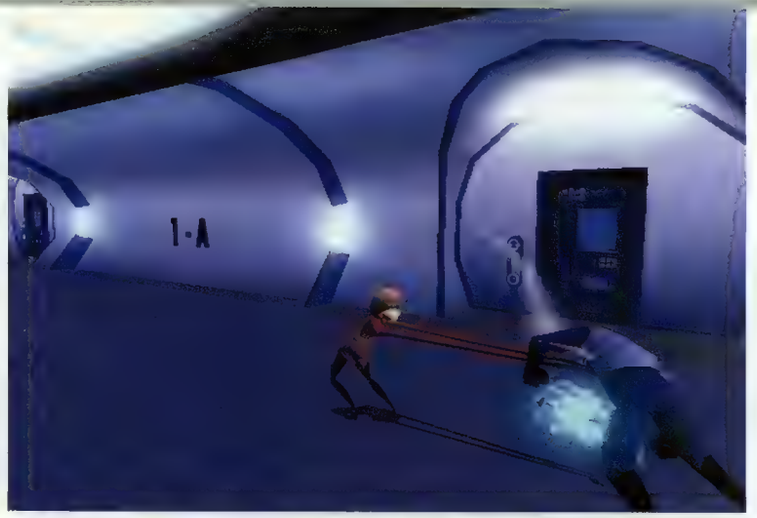

After Crypto busts out of human captivity, he's ready to lay down some serious firepower.





The Incredibles

With a name like that, it better be good



A super-strong man, his elastic-limbed wife, their lightning-fast son and their invisible daughter—they are the Incredibles, and if you somehow haven't heard, they're the stars of what is sure to be one of the fall's biggest movies, courtesy of Disney and Pixar, not to mention the video game adaptation from THQ.

Following the plot of the film, as the Incredibles are roused from their comfy suburban lifestyle to do battle with the villainous Syndrome, the game combines many genres—fighting action, platforming, racing, shooting, stealth and more—with each family member taking on tasks best suited for his or her superpower. Mr. Incredible's stages are primarily straight action affairs, with his powerful punches and throws comprising the bulk of the gameplay (with the occasional first-person turret section thrown in for good measure), while obnoxious son Dash's stages are races against the clock through obstacle-laden courses, be they suburban streets or jungle gullies. My favorite stages so far are those of Elastigirl (Mr. Incredible's wife), which feature agile fighting techniques as well as grappling play mechanics whereby she uses her rubber-like arms to rappel and grab enemies from afar. While daughter Violet's stages have yet to be revealed, this is likely where the stealth aspects of the game occur, and another top-secret character is also playable—although THQ isn't divulging details yet.

As expected, the game's graphics recreate the stylized look of the film quite well—the bronze view of the vast cityscape at sunset is rather impressive—and most of the movie's vocal talent, including Samuel L. Jackson, Holly Hunter and Jason Lee, are lending their voices for further authenticity. Also, in a unique twist, composer Michael Giacchino (known for Medal of Honor) was actually signed on to work on the game before he was hired to create the soundtrack for the movie; the result is an excellent John Williams-sounding score for both.

Last year, developer Heavy Iron Studios turned what could have been just another licensed game into a sleeper success with SpongeBob Squarepants: Battle for Bikini Bottom. Hopefully they'll go for an encore with The Incredibles. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: Heavy Iron Studios
Publisher: THQ
Available: November



"...the game combines many genres...with each family member taking on tasks best suited for his or her superpower."



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Project: Snowblind

Many games later, Crystal Dynamics decides it's time for an FPS



In the words of first-time first-person shooter developers Crystal Dynamics, Project: Snowblind "represented significant challenges." Whatever those challenges were and continue to be, the team best known for the Legacy of Kain series appears boldly unfettered. Plowing through a visually dazzling, chaotic three-level demo, my biggest question: will a full game maintain this level of excellent design and wild energy?

I don't normally get worked up over what my stash of weapons consists of in an FPS, typically relying on my favorite that acts and feels like my favorite from every other game. Here we get the pistol, the sniper rifle, the rocket launcher, and everything has the now-requisite alternating fire option. They all work just fine and come in handy in the ways you'd expect. But where Project: Snowblind really started to grab me was with some distinctly kick-ass weapons, like the fletchette, which sends out a burst of energy balls that attacks like a swarm of bees. The enemy reacts in confusion, running in fear, sporadically shooting back in desperation, even catching groups of soldiers in the crossfire. Crystal Dynamics pegs what they're creating as "smart weapons," designed to take on a devious intelligence after they're launched.

Some weapons take some very deliberate strategizing. Spider bombs can be placed to seek out and destroy; variations of sticky bombs can be attached to almost anything, including the living, which only makes matters worse when they run back to their pals. Mechanical enemies pose big problems if you try and take them head on; that's where weapons resembling proximity mines come in handy, sending out a debilitating charge to provide a safer line of fire. And another of my favorites, the riot wall capsule, explodes









"The game is not about isolation and one hero against an army..."

As you'd expect, your gun of choice comes down to the situation at hand.

into an energy shield that allows you to block an enemy charge when things get too out of hand.

The world and its objects have some familiarity, but the near future setting, a sort of cyberpunk dystopia in a war-ravished Hong Kong, inspires all sorts of slick sci-fi creations. The story follows 2nd Lt. Nathan Frost, who possesses the ability to receive bio-modifications, like the ability to see through walls and spot enemies through their heat signatures. Another cool ability is an enhanced perception of time, allowing you to catch grenades in midair. The kind of special gadgets you might expect from such an ability come into play as well, like the use of the Ice Pick, which takes over electronic devices and vehicles.

If screenshots and world details smack of Deus Ex, no surprise: the game was originally being focused as an action title branching off Invisible War. But Project: Snowblind shouldn't be likened to the Deus Ex experience. If my time with the game indicates the entirety of the final result, a sheer apocalypse of action is in order. Crystal Dynamics commented that their intentions are indeed to create an unprecedented stream of battlefield chaos, where endless destruction is happening all around you. The game is not about isolation and one hero against an army, yet apparently there will be more infiltration-type missions mixing up the flow and balance. And yes, multiplayer is a major focus. I spent much less time in the 16-player arenas than I did with the solo missions, but the capture-the flag skirmishes certainly didn't bore. Project: Snowblind is on to something big. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Eidos
Available: Winter











The chaos around you is insane; fortunately, you get a little help from your allies.





METROID PRIME ECHOES

Two worlds, one massive sci-fi adventure

Two years ago, Retro Studios did what many assumed was the impossible: they took a beloved Nintendo franchise out of an eight-year hiatus, replaced its 2D gameplay with a first-person perspective and updated the series for modern audiences while still retaining the conventions, as well as the heart, of the original game. The result was Metroid Prime, which quickly put any doubts about the series' change in direction to rest, as the adventure proved to be one of the best GameCube games to date, as well as arguably the best game of the year. Climbing into the power suit of legendary bounty hunter Samus Aran had never been so atmospheric; Space Pirates had never seemed so lethal as they did in 3D. Metroid Prime left gamers with just one major question: how would they be able to top it with a sequel?

If you've played the Metroid Prime 2 Echoes demo that Nintendo has been giving out through various promotions, then you already know the answer: more of the same gripping gameplay, only in a world that's bigger, better, deeper. "Echoes" isn't just a subtitle; it's a philosophy that permeates the very structure of the game. In Metroid Prime 2, Samus is called back into action to investigate the disappearance of Galactic Trooper Squad Bravo after they tracked Samus' perennial foes, the Space Pirates, to the world of Aether. On the distant planet, Samus finds more than she bargained for: Aether is suffering from unnatural climatic changes, massive tectonic shifts and impending global destruction. An object made of the powerful element known as Phazon is the culprit—its impact on Aether caused the world to split in two, existing in the same physical space but in different planes of reality. Light Aether is a world in concert with nature, while its shadow has been cast as Dark Aether, a more industrial environment dominated by the Phazon-spawned Ing. In discordance with Light

Aether's philosophy to use the planet's energy for subsistence-level existence, the merciless Ing wish to drain the planet dry, destroying Light Aether in the process. The dichotomy between the two worlds is reflected through their gameplay—Light Aether has more of an isolated puzzle aspect to it, while Dark Aether is more focused on combat—and also the design of their inhabitants: the Luminoth, the guardians of Light Aether, are modeled after moths, creatures drawn to light, while the Ing seem to be living shadows.

Samus becomes intertwined in the conflict when she finds her suit bonded to the Energy Transfer Module, an energy-draining device essential to the Ing's plans, making her their prime target. Naturally, Samus allies herself with the Luminoth, embarking on a mission to restore power to Light Aether's four temples, saving their world and ending the Ing menace in the process. To do so, Samus will have to move between the two Aethers, solving puzzles or accomplishing tasks in one to proceed in the other. A massive gap, for example, may prevent Samus from progressing in Light Aether, but if she finds a way into Dark Aether, she may be able to locate a panel to reposition a walkway, then return to Light Aether, where the gap will now have been bridged, allowing her to proceed; comparisons to Soul Reaver or Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past would not be wrong, especially since co-producer Kensuke Tanabe had a hand in said Zelda game. However, not all tasks are as simple, and the way is fraught

"The dichotomy between the two worlds is reflected through their gameplay...and also the design of their inhabitants..."





Massive bosses like this mutant worm await Samus on Dark Aether.





Interview with Retro Studios

Mark Pacini, game director **Michael Kellbaugh**, president **Bryan Walker**, producer

play: A lot of gamers, myself included, point to Metroid as one of our favorite games ever. Obviously you guys had a lot to live up to. When you first went to the drawing board and decided to update the series, what was it you felt defined Metroid? What was the one overriding quality you knew you had to focus on?
Mark Pacini: One of the goals we maintained with this latest project that was very similar to the last... It's very challenging obviously to follow up Metroid Prime, and a lot of things we tried to do with Prime was first and foremost keep that Metroid feel. We're all huge Super Metroid fans, and what we felt were the really strong points, the real defining features of Metroid were, first and foremost, exploration of the world. That feeling of isolation, you were by yourself exploring these vast, cavernous areas. You really are encouraged to explore your surroundings. And that's exactly what we wanted with Metroid Prime. And that's why the game ended up being more skewed towards exploration than just straight shooting things. That was so important to us. And second was bringing out the persona of Samus and her abilities. That was really challenging and something we're continuing to especially focus on with Echoes, like the visor and the Morph Ball. Things that are really distinct; Samus is almost defined by the morph ball. So we wanted to really build on those unique facets of her game mechanics; it was something we had to really concentrate on. We have the same goals with Echoes: mainly a game based around adventure and exploration with interesting puzzle and story elements, but as well as the action element. We're keeping a very similar philosophy.

So you're definitely keeping with the same basic structure as before: an emphasis on exploration over shooting?
Pacini: Yeah. The action is a little more stepped up in this game. The E3 demo we had showed a very battle-centric section of the game. But again, it's very similar to the pacing of Prime, where a good portion of the game is exploration and puzzle solving, with really heavy doses of action thrown in there. So the pacing of the game is definitely akin to Prime.

Well, Prime was certainly awesome and surprised a lot of people. But like any game, there always tends to be something you can point to for improvement. When you started on Echoes, looking back at Prime, was there anything specific you were disappointed with, anything you really wanted to improve or change?
Michael Kellbaugh: One of the big things we're happy to have in Echoes that we really attempted with the first one was the multiplayer options. There were a couple challenges: we definitely didn't want to just plunk a multiplayer option into the game just for the sake of having it. We really wanted to keep the Metroid feeling into a multiplayer element, and we felt with Echoes, we were able to devote the time and resources to accomplish it.
Pacini: Another issue we felt came out well in Prime but we thought we could really improve on is how we relate the story to the player. I think that in Prime, we were all consumed with getting the game to play as well as it could, to have that Metroid feel. The story was a little bit pushed to the background. I think that we really thought we could improve on that. Now that we've established the gameplay, we could build off of that and improve it. We were able, for example, to put more cinematic elements into the game, put more story elements and a more cohesive structure for the player to follow. We think we've made some really nice improvements and have been able to flesh things out a lot more.

It sounds like you might be a little freer on this game, maybe explore some things more. It's like you say, I'm sure you were really bound by doing all you could to stick to the spirit and feel of the original. Just going

"We had something we had established and worked, and it allowed us to go into some different directions and not feel so intimidated."

-Mark Pacini, game director

into the first person—people really questioned that. And you did pull it off. Is there more enjoyment, a little more freedom this time around now that you can sit back and say, "Hey, we really proved we could do it. Now we can just really build on that and not be so self-aware"?
Pacini: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. The first game was extremely challenging. There were so many expectations and we had extremely high expectations on ourselves. We're so overwhelmed by the response to the game and that we were able to succeed in that. So with Metroid Prime 2 Echoes, we were not as consumed with that part of the project anymore. We had something we had established and worked, and it allowed us to go into some different directions and not feel so intimidated. We wanted to explore some areas and push things a little farther, and I think the result is really good.

It was obviously a major undertaking to build the engine and put it in the first-person perspective and to deal with all the implications that come with that. Was there ever even a debate going into Echoes to explore going into the third person?
Pacini: [Long pause] Sure… [laughs] But we really felt what defined Metroid Prime—well, partly defined Metroid Prime—was the perspective in which you play the game. The way you interface with the game that made it unique to the franchise.

How much do you refer back to Super Metroid? It's an awfully old game, but certainly very distinct for its time. You say a lot of you are big fans, but just how much do you really look back for inspiration?
Pacini: When we were developing the first Metroid Prime, Super Metroid was absolutely our bible. We really felt that was really the defining game of the series, so we took the feeling we got from playing that game, all the high points that were extremely interesting and made it such an addictive and innovative experience. And we tried to infuse prime with that sense. With Metroid Prime 2 Echoes, I think Prime has kind of come into its own, and we can sort of build off of the things that we've done, and not have to refer so much to Super Metroid, and kind of bring series fans something new and interesting. That is uniquely Prime.

You guys are closing in on the final stretch of development. Looking back, any major events stick out, any crazy problems or unsuspecting disasters?
Kellbaugh: Well, we're working a lot [laughs].
Pacini: One of the things, and it's not very funny because it kind of threatened my life… we showed the screw attack and the wall jump at E3, and the feature wasn't complete. It wasn't





with peril; the atmosphere of Dark Aether is deadly, causing Samus to take constant damage unless enveloped by the light of Luminoth-created safety zones. The Ing can move between worlds as well, possessing Light Aether creatures (via scripted events) to make them forcibly do their bidding. And then there's that Dark Samus seen in the demo; is its appearance the result of the stolen power suit from the first Prime?

Fortunately, as always, Samus has a number of tools and weapons at her disposal. New Light and Dark Beams, specifically designed to be more effective on foes of the opposing nature, join the existing arsenal, which includes traditional missiles, super missiles and power bombs. The Grapple Beam, Varia Suit and Spider Ball make return appearances, while the Screw Attack functions again for the first time in Prime, and a new Dark Suit will reduce the damage Samus takes in Dark Aether. New visors for Samus have been introduced as well, replacing the Infrared and X-Ray visors from the previous game. The Dark Visor will let Samus see otherwise invisible enemies, among other yet-unrevealed functions, and the Echo Visor replaces the visual spectrum with sonar waves, which seems perfect for navigating in absolute darkness. Other new weapons include the Seeker Missile, which locks on to multiple enemies, and the Annihilator Beam, which we haven't yet seen, but the name seems self-explanatory.

"...Prime 2's versus play isn't the multiplayer norm: players can actually lock on to each other, and the morph ball factors heavily into play."

The other new element that echoes within Metroid Prime 2 is, of course, the multiplayer component. If there was anything missing from the original Prime, a multiplayer mode would be it, but that has now been corrected with split-screen versus FPS competition for up to four players. However, Prime 2's versus play isn't the multiplayer norm: players can actually lock on to each other, and the morph ball factors heavily into play. Not only does morphing allow you to break your opponent's lock-on, but it also permits the use of launch pads to reach new areas and to unleash the dreaded Death Ball ability—instant death upon contact—should you acquire it. A plethora of other power-ups, such as invisibility and a hacker mode that lets you corrupt your opponent's power suit, are available as well, and acquired weapons have additional effects not found in the single-player game: the power bomb causes temporary blindness, the Dark Beam immobilizes foes, the Light Beam sets them ablaze. Although only a couple arenas and modes (straight deathmatch and a coin-collection mode) have been shown so far, a wealth of options should be available in the final game.

While Metroid Prime 2 certainly won't be as revolutionary as its predecessor, all signs so far point to it being every bit as good if not better. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Retro Studios
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November

100 percent signed off on that it was even going to make it into the game. It's a very complex system that could cause a lot of bugs and cause a lot of problems for us in development. So after the overwhelmingly positive response we got at E3, I kind of got the third degree from engineering that we showed it too early. Unfortunately, to get the feature in the game they had to work three times as hard and all their hard work was able to get the feature in. It's unfortunate that happened, and it wasn't intentional, but it was kind of an interesting curveball in development that we showed a feature before we even knew we could put it in the game.
Kellbaugh: We still don't know if we can keep it [laughs].

You know, I never get tired of talking about Super Metroid, and if I did have to quickly name an all-time favorite, it would be an easy pick. You're really dealing with an immensely special series. When you think back, what's some specific memories you have of Super Metroid?
Kellbaugh: Well, for me, I know this might be kind of a simplistic answer, but it's gotta be just the atmosphere, the music, the feeling in the game. I'm a big sci-fi fan, and to hear Kenji Yamamoto's music combined with the graphics of every Metroid of the time. That's what I reflect on: just the feeling I had when I'm playing the game that's kind of overwhelming between the audio and the graphics.

You guys are kind of lucky to be able to work on such a special project. It must be a blast to take something we all love so much and put your unique spin on it?
Brian Walker: I've been in the industry about 13 years now and had the fortune of working with a lot of great teams on a lot of great projects. The exhilaration and excitement about working on Prime was equaled by the fear of failure. That we would put out a project that Metroid fans, like myself, would just hate. One thing that I've kind of learned in this industry: if you don't risk, if you don't try to do something that other people are afraid to do, you're never going to hit a homerun. Retro as a whole stepped up to the plate, and even though we were scared to death, we were equally excited. With Prime 2, a lot of that anticipation is kind of set aside by relief. We're not as concerned with breaking these new barriers of Metroid in 3D; now we're solely concentrating on making the best game we possibly can.

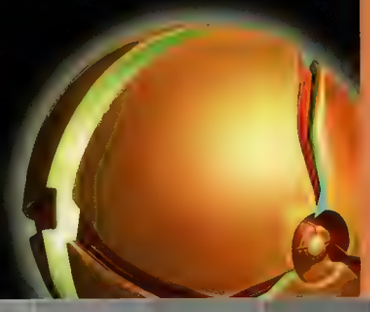
It's kind of funny that you had so much to live up to going from Super Metroid to Prime, and here you are again, having to deliver again and surpass what was one of the best games of the year.
Kellbaugh: It's a good problem to have. **play**

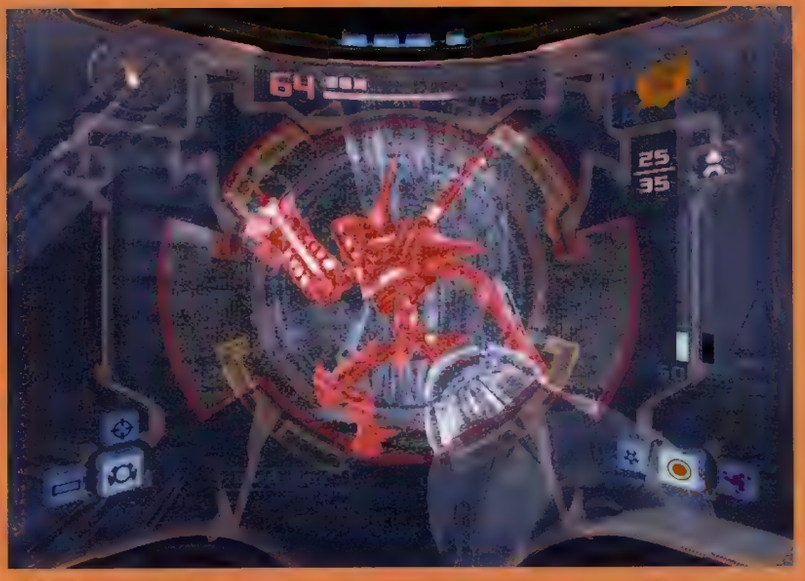




"...if you don't risk, if you don't try to do something that other people are afraid to do, you're never going to hit a homerun."

-Brian Walker, producer





Right: The Dark Visor in action. Without it, this enemy would be invisible.

Paper Mario

The Thousand-Year Door

Opening the way to another fantastic quest





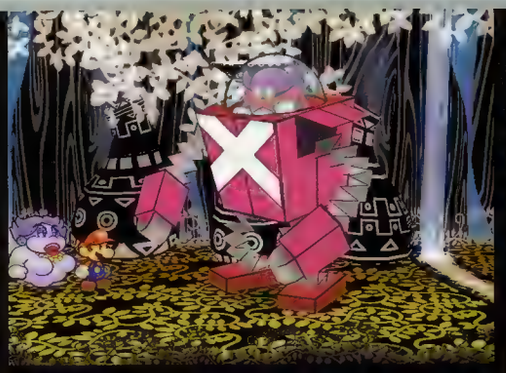
The Princess is missing, there's luminescent treasure to be collected, and whole legions of enemies are in need of a good stomping. Yes, it's another day in the life of Mario. But this isn't a typical Mario adventure—this is Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door, sequel to the excellent N64 game from a few years back. Like that game, The Thousand-Year Door merges RPG mechanics with the Mario universe, adds an extra bit of real-time interaction and polishes it all up with that intangible Nintendo charm.

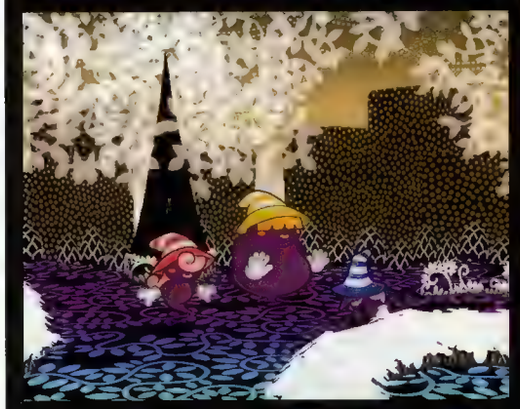
This time out, Princess Peach has sent Mario a treasure map that she discovered while vacationing in the seedy town of Rogueport. Although she orders Mario to join her on a quest for the treasure, when he arrives, Peach is nowhere to be found, and so Mario sets off to find the crystal stars that will unlock the Thousand-Year Door and reveal its treasures to whoever opens it...and hopefully encounter the Princess on the way.

Naturally, Mario won't be searching alone. As in the original Paper Mario, numerous partner characters join Mario on his mission, each with unique skills both in and out of battle. While some, like Goombella, a Goomba who can give info on enemies and environments, are very similar to allies in the original, others are new to the sequel, including Flurrie, a wind spirit that can blow gusts to solve puzzles, Miss Mowz, a Mouser who can help Mario find treasure, and even a Yoshi who turns up to join the unusual crew.

Also like previous Mario RPGs, an element of extra interaction ensures that battles consistently stay interesting. Skillfully timed button presses or joystick motions—aka Action Commands—will help Mario add extra damage while on offense and avoid getting hit while on defense. But this game also adds several new twists, including a counterattack move that requires even more adept timing and an audience that watches the battles. Weird it is, but by impressing the audience with Action Commands and other stylish moves, Mario can build up his special move meter and thus utilize his most powerful abilities.

Mario has new moves outside of battle as well. The endearing storybook aesthetic provides more than just good looks (and it is an impressive-looking game; just wait until hundreds of enemies swarm the screen)—the concept of the characters being made of paper is actually incorporated into the gameplay. During his quest,







Massively populated scenes like these make you appreciate the visual style.

"...like previous Mario RPGs, an element of extra interaction ensures that battles consistently stay interesting."

Mario learns to take advantage of his paper form by rolling himself into a paper tube (to roll under objects), folding into a paper airplane or a boat, or simply turning himself sideways to slip through small openings.

Even though Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door should be available by the time this issue hits stores, Nintendo hasn't seen fit to provide a review copy of the game yet. But judging from what I've seen so far—from the distinctive gameplay to the hugely entertaining translation to the hilarious between-chapter Bowser sequences—I have no doubt it will be one of the year's best on GameCube. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Intelligent Systems
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October







Xenosaga Episode II

Jenseits von Gut und Bose

The amazing saga continues



When we last left our band of intrepid adventurers at the end of Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht, the crew had saved a planet from absolute devastation and narrowly escaped a fiery death aboard the experimental space facility called Proto Merkabah. Prior to that, the heroes—Shion, chief scientist at Vector Industries; KOS-MOS, a battle android built by Shion; Jr., a sharpshooter; Ziggy, cyborg bounty hunter; MOMO, a prototype "Realian" modeled after a little girl; the enigmatic and powerful young man called chaos; Allen Ridgeley, Shion's engineer co-worker; and the crew of the starship Elsa—had faced down the nearly unstoppable threat of the Gnosis alien menace as well as the psychotic, murderous Albedo. As their exploits came to a close, however, the cast had done little more than survive. Albedo yet lived, the Gnosis were far from gone, and more powerful enemies stirred in the background. While Xenosaga Episode I was one of the best RPGs of 2003, its philosophical, introspective and sometimes-twisted plot neglected to answer the multitude of questions it proposed, and its characters' pasts and true intentions remained shrouded in mystery.

Nearly two years later, the sequel has already hit Japan and will be coming to the U.S. in early 2005. Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Bose features an enhanced, more strategic battle system and better-integrated mech combat, as well as a quest that will catapult the returning Xenosaga I cast, along with new faces, into the unknown to find the powerful cosmic artifact known as the Zohar. We caught up with the Japanese developers to find out what else to expect from the next installment of their sci-fi epic. True to Xenosaga form, for every answer we received, there linger yet more questions.

Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Monolith
Publisher: Namco
Available: February 2005

"...a quest that will catapult the returning Xenosaga I cast, along with new faces, into the unknown to find the powerful cosmic artifact known as the Zohar."



Interview

Answered collectively by **Tomohiro Hagiwara,** producer, and **Kou Arai,** director

play: Could you explain how Xenosaga Episode II begins? When Episode I ended, the crew was approaching Second Miltia. Does it begin from there, or has more time elapsed?
The story continues right where Episode I left off, on Second Miltia, and the game begins with a playable flashback on Miltia, fourteen years prior.

Why were the characters redesigned to look more realistic? Did it have anything to do with appealing more to a Western audience?
Yes. We felt making the characters more realistic would help us break into the North American market. These changes also enabled us to create models with a wider range of emotions, allowing us to create cutscenes with expressions much richer than Episode I.

There were a lot of questions left hanging in Episode I...what Wilhelm's true intentions are, how Virgil—back from the dead—will impact the story, who or what chaos truly is. Will we finally get some answers in Episode II, or just more questions? Can you give us some hints about what to expect?
Episode II focuses primarily on Jr., Gaignun and Albedo, so a lot of questions regarding them will be answered. Some of the mysteries from Episode I will also be addressed, but expect more twists and turns in the story. It is a deep story. You will most likely be left wondering quite a lot about chaos.

We were also told in Episode I that Shion's brother, Jin Uzuki, would play an important part in Episode II. How does he fit in?
Jin will play a key role in the development of the story. I highly recommend playing through Episode II and watching the events all fall into place. Jin is also an extremely powerful character, so in some respects, he will be extremely important to the progression of the story!



The character in the middle is Jin, Shion's brother. He's a master swordsman.

"Some of the mysteries from Episode I will also be addressed, but expect more twists and turns in the story. It is a deep story."

Tomohiro Hagiwara, producer, and Kou Arai, director





And what about Allen? Out of all the characters, he just seems to be an ordinary, everyday guy. Will he have a bigger role to play in Xenosaga II?
Allen will be the same old, ordinary, everyday Allen. We feel that is exactly Allen's purpose in life—to be an ordinary human being.

A lot of the story in Episode I seemed philosophical and introspective, as well as religious in nature. Will we see a lot of similar deep themes tackled in Episode II, and how will these themes be explored?
Yes, we are staying true to the Xenosaga series in Episode II and will build upon and play with the philosophical, introspective and religious themes in Episode I. It is hard to discuss just how the themes will be explored without giving too much away, so let me just say that Episode II will be a deep, wonderfully woven tale. We hope the players find it stimulating and enriching.

Is there any difference in the combat system this time? Will the AGWSs have a bigger role in combat?
Yes, we built upon the combat system from Episode I and split up the battles into character battles and robot battles. The character battles will fundamentally be the same as Episode I, but we have added Boost Combos and Weak Zones to bring more strategy to the game. We have created a specialized robot battle system that will be different from the character battles. To match the new battle system, we created new, stronger ES battle robots to take the place of the AGWSs.

What about the environments? Will there be more organic environments this time, and more diversity in the scenery?
Episode I happened mostly in space, with the Gnosis fighting primarily in battleships, military bases and other highly mechanical areas. In Episode II, you will be fighting the Gnosis across many different terrestrial environments.

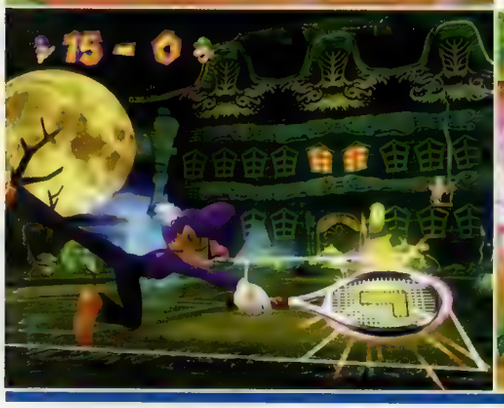
Lastly, can you tell us about the new music composer in Xenosaga Episode II, why she was selected for the job and what kind of a style she'll bring to the game?
We chose Ms. Yuki Kajiura because we thought her mystical, mysterious sound was perfect for Episode II. We showed her the script and movies and let her use her imagination to freely create the music to fit. We really like what she came up with. **play**

The new ES battle mechs are a force to be reckoned with in Episode II.



Mario Tennis







Nintendo announced this product years ago, and at long last, Mario Tennis for GameCube is almost here. The biggest change over the N64 version is the addition of new Marioesque gimmicks to the themed courts, which were only touched upon in the previous game. In the DK Jungle, for example, you can knock Klaptraps off the net to make them attack your opponent, or Boos can interfere in the Luigi's Mansion court. Training minigames, like Shine Bingo and Blooper Rally, will help you improve your hitting skills, and plenty of Mario characters, like Yoshi, Wario, Luigi and Bowser, are featured. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube
Developer: Camelot
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November

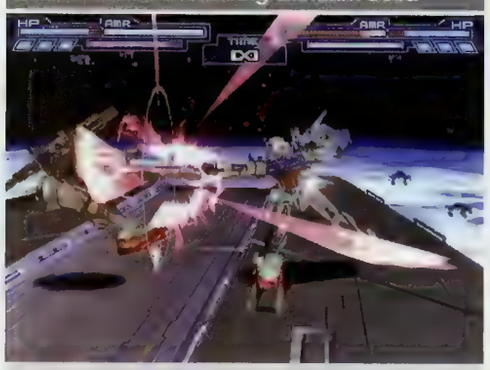
Need For Speed Underground 2



Not to be outdone by SRS, EA's next kick at the street racing can starts you at the airport, where you'll get on the freeway and drive into the interconnected metropolis of the game. That's straight up crazy, yo... Hey, get used to it. Like SRS, NFS Underground 2 adopts the dopey street lingo you only hear in rap videos and games. Back to the game, spontaneity is just one of a heap of cool new features meant to give the game a living guise on top of all the tuning, customization, online challenges and scantily dressed street hos you can shake a set of 20-inch rims at. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA
Publisher: EA
Available: November

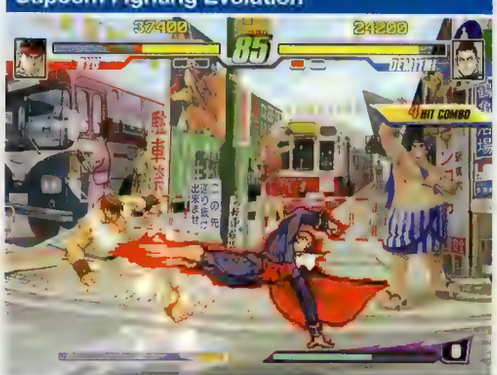
Battle Assault 3 featuring Gundam Seed

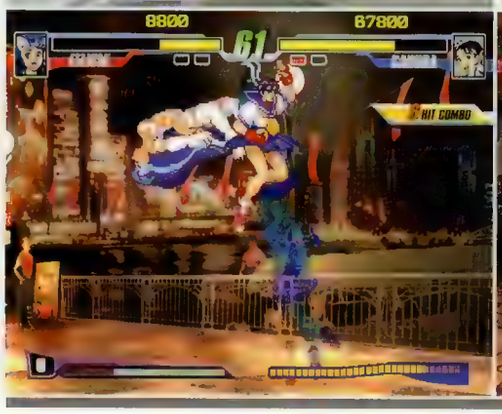


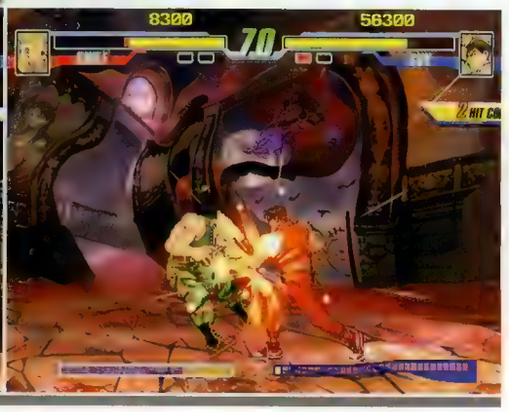
Based on the Gundam Seed iteration of the popular anime series, Battle Assault 3 casts players in the role of Kira Yamato as he engages in heavy-metal-on-heavy-metal action in arena-style mech combat. The game starts off simply enough, facing enemy Gundams in one-on-one battles, but as Kira proceeds through the three massive chapters (each containing sub-chapters with many episodes in each), he'll face increasingly difficult odds. More than 30 Gundams are available, each capable of both melee and ranged attacks, and boasting various weapons. A versus mode is also included. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Bandai
Publisher: Bandai
Available: November

Capcom Fighting Evolution







2D fighting is alive and well, and Capcom has the game to prove it. Capcom Fighting Evolution, however, is something of a misnomer, as it's not so much an evolution of the genre as it is a combination of many great fighting games from Capcom's past. Street Fighter II, Street Fighter III, Street Fighter Alpha, Darkstalkers and the obscure Red Earth are all represented, and the characters retain their signature abilities unique to each game (Alpha Counters for SFA characters, parries for SF3, etc.). Fighters even have personalized endings drawn by the creators of the Street Fighter comic. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November



Sly 2 Band of Thieves™

PlayStation 2

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Cartoon Violence

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Preview Gallery

Sega Superstars



Taking a hint from Sony's EyeToy: Play game, Sega is releasing its own minigame collection for use with the USB camera—the difference is that Sega Superstars' minigames are all based on Sega hits from years gone by to give it that extra charm. The Sonic game lets players wave their arms to collect rings and Chaos Emeralds; House of the Dead lets you punch out zombies instead of shooting them; Virtua Fighter lets you physically duke it out with the game's martial artists; NiGHTS actually recreates the sensation of flying. Twelve minigames await in all. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: November

Cold Winter



Cold Winter starts you out as Andrew Sterling, an MI6 agent, is aided in an escape from a Chinese prison. From there you'll be introduced to mass destruction and shooting and global chaos—North Korea's a prescient setting. The game's sticking to realism, with a modern-day aesthetic and the inclusion of 30 real-world weapons. You won't be going it alone all the time, as other characters fight around you and as a team. Injuries and kills are being embellished for gritty impact with limb-specific hits and blood effects. **Brady Flechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Swordfish Studios
Publisher: VU Games
Available: December





Shining Tears



How appropriate that just as we re-visit Nextech's sensational 1994 16-bit action-RPG, Crusader of Centy, we're met with a game along the same lines based on Sega's Shining Force saga, set for an early 2005 release. Where Shining Force has traditionally revolved around strategy role-playing, Shining Tears shifts the focus to real-time action where up to 50 characters can occupy the screen at one time. Characters can level up from 1-99 (complete with customization spread across skills, items and weapons) throughout 20-50 hours of gameplay, including eight endings. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Nextech
Publisher: Sega
Available: March 2005

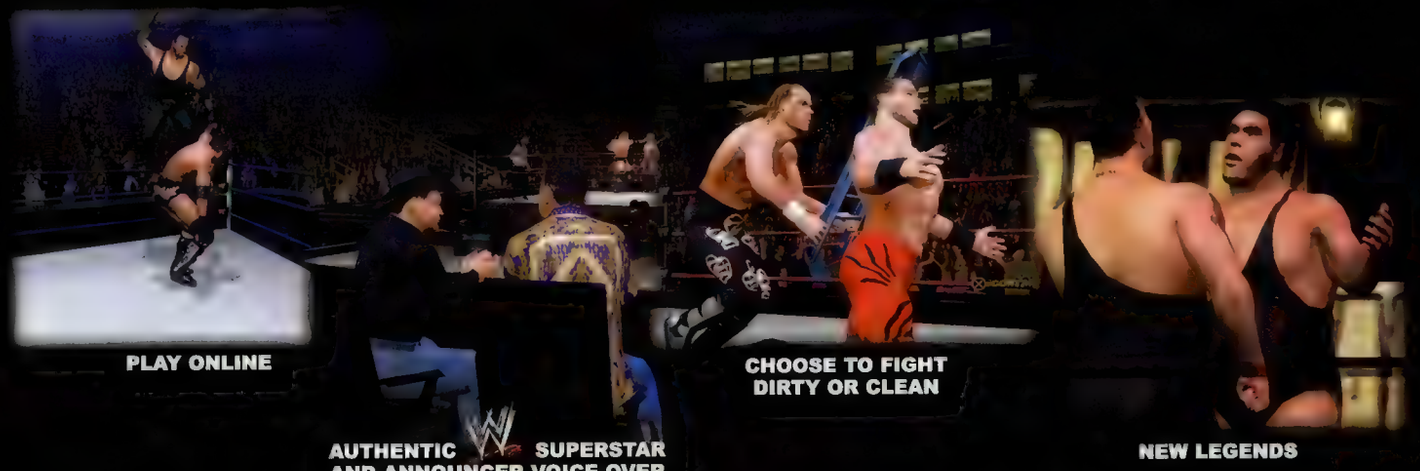


Virtua Quest



Set in a future where humans spend much of their time immersed in the virtual world of Nexus, Virtua Quest stars a boy named Sei, a Nexus newbie who finds himself tasked with finding the legacy of Dural—Virtua Souls. Despite the fighting game heritage, Quest is a full-blown adventure filled with jumping, climbing and grapple-hook mechanics, as well as deep fighting action. Each Virtua Soul harbors a special move that will be taught to you by the Virtua Fighters themselves, allowing you to expand and customize your technique list. I just hope Sega works out the camera issues before release. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Sega-AM2
Publisher: Sega
Available: January 2005



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Language
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Violence

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NEO Contra

The Contra series powers on



Behold…Animal Contra! Behold…Pheromone Contra! Behold…Russian-looking soldiers dancing the Boushka atop rolling boulders for locomotion, terribly designed charging missile launchers that look like matchbox trucks, and our heroes, named Bill Rizer and Genbei Jaguar Yagyu, sprinting across the whirling blades of a helicopter, their little legs animating so furiously you can't help but laugh. Neo Contra's developers apparently wanted to bring a little light-hearted fun to their classic action series. I laughed, all right—but there's a gigantic difference between fun and ridiculous.

This was the last thing I wanted from a modern update to one of my favorite series. When Neo Contra misses the mark, it misses big: the absolutely stupid, languid cutscenes are the biggest offender. The fortunate thing is, you can skip right through them and not miss a beat of what drives Neo Contra to its ultimately engaging success—apoplectic shooting action that doesn't let us catch our breath till the hard-fought score is tallied up at the end of the level.

Mastering the seven areas of constant-view-shifting action is a blast, and, of course, having a friend along for the ride is a must. While the game isn't as hard as it could have been, discovering the patterns, getting to know the layout and learning to better dissect the masterfully positioned chaos with your weapons of choice keeps you coming back for more. There's a good deal to open up, from characters to weapon sets (no powerups this time) to settings and levels. The hit percentage system's a nice addition: simply going for an "A" rating will keep you locked into the action for hours.

The character designs are off at times, and the production is basic, but the overall look nicely pleases, and there are plenty of impressive bosses and big standout moments that genuinely thrill. The designers were going for a ceaselessly visceral, kinetic presentation—it's all perfectly Contra with a personal edge—skillfully pulling it off.

Gameplay like this is such an increasing rarity; calling it antiquated is just not getting it. Sure, it could use a truly modern update for greater effect, and gamers weaned on modern trimmings and broad 3D will look on with indifference. But don't be one of those haters and behold the blistering fun of classic gaming. **Brady Fiechter** **B**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: October



The game's presented through multiple perspectives, playing off old-school 2D shooter convention.





"...apoplectic shooting action that doesn't let us catch our breath till the hard-fought score is tallied up at the end of the level."

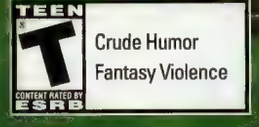
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The Bard's Tale



The Bard's a bit of a prick. He's a lot of a prick, actually, crassly pursuing the maidens of the land, leaving a wake of trouble wherever he goes, more than willing and able wherever big coinage is ripe for the taking. Conversations inevitably lead to insults and sarcasm. And occasionally really funny, really infectious song and dance.

The colorful Bard's Tale begins with the words of the narrator, who takes us back to the beginning of our unwitting hero's story, before his dimwitted actions released all hell on the lovely land. For his first task of clearing out a bar basement of its rat infestation—the voluptuous owner makes her reward intentions quite clear—the Bard's initially weak and pretty much helpless, but, as in any good top-down action-RPG in the spirit of Baldur's Gate, gathering skill points with every kill and a bounty of money to buy sturdier goods will gradually follow.

Here the collection and experience growth is kept about as slight as it could be. Maybe a bit too slight; a more robust system would have made the overwhelming monster-hacking toward the finale feel more satisfying. But the real focus of acquisition lies in the gathering of helpers and magical support, which are called forth by the mystical tones of the Bard's lute. With a proper stock of mana and learned technique, the Bard can call forth multiple helpers at once, who fight it out alongside in an impressive show of camaraderie and strategic skill. Their presence is a wonderful inclusion and goes a long way in heightening the adventure.

The game is ramped up with enjoyable character interaction and a good role-playing spirit, benefited by a limited friendly/rude choice of responses to conversation. Travel takes place over a monster-infested world map, taking the Bard from fantastic town to forest to dungeon as each big chapter unfolds. In all The Bard's Tale's excellent, individual design strokes, fans of the genre will certainly feel right at home.

It's in the story where the game dances to a thin, quirky beat. Much has been said about The Bard's Tale's reliance on humor, especially poking fun at video game convention. Some scenes hum with genuine fun, while others sputter miserably—and calling out silly convention while still designing your game to go through the same motions deadens the flavor.

It's difficult to fully sell these jokes without physical delivery; the cutscenes are filled with stiffs. There's a lot of stopping to wade through a loose, shallow narrative that keeps the fairly unlikable Bard at a distance and tends to deflate more than it should from the inexplicably bad direction; camera angles are so jarring and random and the pauses in dialogue so off-putting that it's impossible to maintain a proper interest in the storytelling.

True to its unrefined hero, The Bard's Tale could use a little more class, depth and sophistication. Which certainly doesn't mean they're still not entertaining company to keep. **Brady Fiechter** B

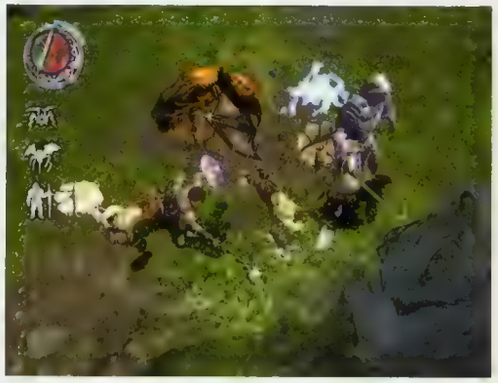
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: inExile
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October

"The game is ramped up with enjoyable character interaction and a good role-playing spirit..."









The aid of summoned allies adds immeasurably to the experience.

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MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Drugs

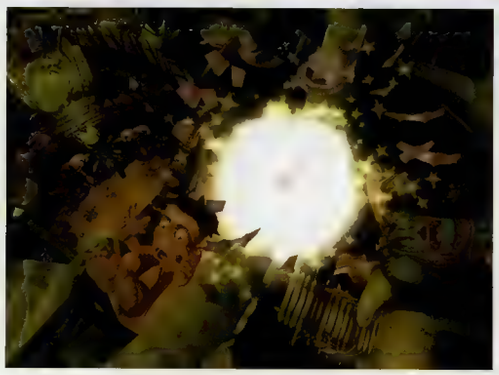
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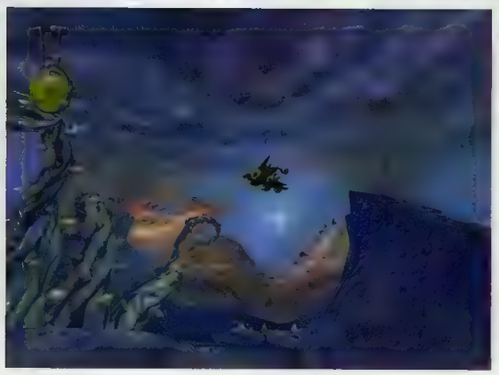


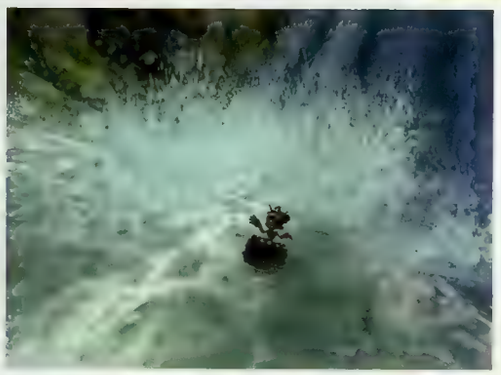
Tak 2

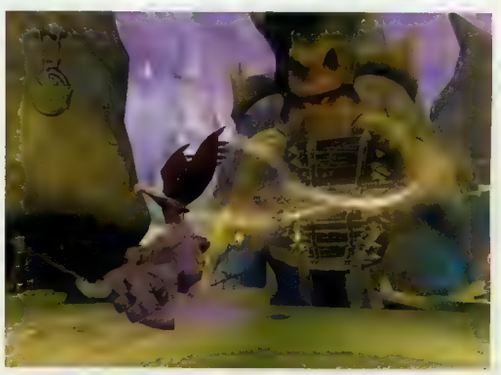
The Staff of Dreams

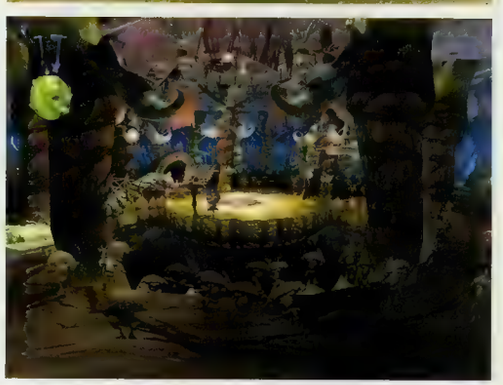
A Tak of all trades but the master of none











Tak and the Power of Juju was a *massive* non-linear game; in fact, I'd venture to say it is among the most in-depth platformers ever created. I wandered around in it literally for weeks soaking in grandeur almost too good for words while peeling back its countless layers. Selling in the neighborhood of a million copies, a sequel was, of course, ordered, and so the quest began to squeeze all of that magnificence into a more linear package in time for a Christmas 2004 release—the end result of which is a smaller, more linear game.

Tak 2 is a solid day's worth of trippy fun and visual euphoria (if you can live with the flaws), but they had to check "epic" at the door to make it happen. The gist of the adventure centers around Tak (and Jibolba in the real world) darting between realms to keep resident henchmen Pins and Needles from delivering the staff of dreams to the evil shaman Tlalock, back from oblivion as a man-goat, vowing his ultimate revenge. Locke (played awesomely by Patrick Warburton) and everyone's favorite Juju are also along for the ride—adding comic relief to an integrated real-time story that once again exhibits the polish you'd expect from a Nickelodeon-supported endeavor—rounding out a strong cinematic foundation on which to build.

Elsewhere, however, things are rather jumbled. Tak 2 is a strange but beautiful bird. At the outset, the action revolves around firing Jibolba in flea form at critters to have them open the way, complimented by platforming and the best river runs known to man. Next, we're introduced to an amazing dream sequence powered by four-wheeled catapult, which is just awesome, then it's on to a shooting/puzzle binge, followed by a series of ultra-trippy, somewhat flawed rift chases and ultimately a series of collection levels, assembling pieces of the rift to catch Pins and Needles after they grab the staff. In between, what was to be the game's big hook—adopting a spirit animal—goes nowhere (in fact, the ability gained costs so much mana to use, it renders the transformation almost useless), while yet another great angle—becoming different beasties to solve massive-scale puzzles—comes off as unpolished, exhibiting design flaws in both control and animation. As I passed through each phase initially, based on my experience with the original, I figured it was all just an elaborate set-up for the epic to come, but none of these aspects ever end up going anywhere. After pockets of each, we're treated to a nice little hook ending you see coming a mile away, and then that's a wrap.

In the end, Tak 2 endeavors to do so much that it never really finds its way, and suffers as a result; a shame, given it's one of the prettiest games I've ever seen, as well as being extremely creative and good fun most of the time. So much time was spent on diversity it became adversity, leaving poor Tak (the one aspect of the franchise that demanded work) once again a physics nightmare; he's way too heavy, lacks a wealth of animation routines, and has the flattest, most uncontrollable jump in all of platforming. For a little guy, he controls like a truck where he should feel more like Jak.

Flawed but fun…short but gorgeous…Tak 2 is a by-product of the latest trend of trying so hard to appease the masses you neglect the core audience. I say you don't have to pack 10 games into one. Do two or three things really well and they will come. Wherever publishers are getting the notion that a single game must be all things to all people I do not know, but it's really starting to F-up my platformers. Unless you can polish every aspect to perfection, this is a slippery slope. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Avalanche
Publisher: THQ
Available: October

Tak 2 is certainly a beautiful game. Pity they didn't have more time to smooth out the rough edges.

"Tak 2 is a solid day's worth of trippy fun and visual euphoria...but they had to check 'epic' at the door to make it happen."



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X-Men LEGENDS

Marvel's big gun begins anew

Designing a team-based X-Men game based on the popular top-down action-RPG model was a stroke of genius. As such, Legends goes deeper into X-Men lore than any of its predecessors, offering fans a level of individual manageability never before imagined. In fact, I found myself being pestered to upgrade so often it became an irritant, constantly having to distribute attributes among four players, especially as less-experienced, newly acquired members joined the campaign. That said, there's no denying that the level of interaction in here is humbling.

Where the game stumbles is in character and world design and control. Cel-shading characters this small has rendered them bland versus the category's top dogs, made worse by rings wrapped around their ankles that make them look like board-game pieces. Intended as a means of managing vital statistics, I found myself so engrossed in trying to keep my team alive (the balance has issues too), I never noticed them beyond wishing they'd disappear. The lack of a strafe and limited animation routines hurts their overall look and feel as well. On numerous occasions I had characters slide or get pushed off of cliff faces for lack of edge control and/or the inability to see their feet; and they don't reappear. Even if it's into a mere 10-foot ditch, these mighty super heroes die on impact, sending you back to the nearest save point to either buy them back or recruit a different team member. Given their powers, this seemed a glaring flaw. The game is also riddled with collision miscues (I had Wolverine walking on trees, and you can jump your way into numerous glitches all over the game) and privy to bouts of token level design as you face predictable pockets of resistance and character-specific puzzles as rudimentary as they are mundane. Yet another slight annoyance comes by way of losing your selected character in the heat of battle as the mass of colorful X-Men and NPCs tend to merge into a nucleus of color.

Save it to say, X-Men Legends isn't as polished or as grand as the likes of Baldur's Gate or Champions of Norrath gameplay-wise, but where it really means to shine it does so brightly. The story integration, team aspects and breadth of the universe are all highly commendable. This is Marvel fandom heroin in terms of collectibles and lore, riding on top of a big, rich X-Men universe skillfully acted and scripted down to each and every gestation of the X-Men pride. The NPCs sound off like imbeciles, but elsewhere the performances are top-notch. I found the flashback sequences especially gratifying. It's always nice to see Wolverine at his beastly best, decked out in yellow spandex rather than his new biker gear.

Easily summarized, X-Men Legends is a decent top-down action game encased in an excellent RPG with more than enough super powers to send fans racing to the retail bins. If Raven Soft had paid as much attention to the details and gameplay as they did the role-playing elements, this would have been a tsunami to the genre; as-is, however, it's still the best X-Men game I've played since Clone Wars on Genesis.

Dave Halverson B-

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Raven Software
Publisher: Activision
Available: September

"This is Marvel fandom heroin in terms of collectibles and lore, riding on top of a big, rich X-Men universe..."





Things look nice from afar, but upon closer inspection, the characters lack the detail we've come to expect from the category.



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colin mcrae rally 2005

The rally game you always wanted



Colin McRae, the man, may have slipped away from the rally scene in recent seasons, but Colin McRae, the game, thankfully soldiers on. Carrying yet further improvements to the graphics and physics engine, this latest iteration of the durable series looks and plays better than ever. Changes to the game structure have also made progression through the game a little more Gran Turismo-like with loads of different tournaments and courses to unlock.

Full online play, however, is the big news, and while it has some issues, it gets the job done. One of the inherent problems is the nature of rally racing itself. Being a time-based motorsport, there is none of the sort of wheel-to-wheel racing that typifies the type of action that most like to engage in while online. Instead, you see your competitors (up to eight) on-track represented as car-shaped blobs of color. It's very ugly, and like all online racing games I've tried, you'll see other cars jerk around a bit because of latency issues. These things really pull me out of the experience. Thankfully, you can turn off these ugly representations and just race your race as normal with a clear view. Now the game comes to life online as you feel the pressure of live competition while playing a fantastically crafted rally game. But then, inevitably, you want more, and the online experience is unfortunately fairly basic. There are no tournaments, you can't change the set-up of your cars, and you can't use cars that you've upgraded in the offline play.

But at least the online component is there for whenever you feel like testing your skills against the living. For the rest of the time, you can revel in one of the best-looking and certainly best-playing rally games ever. You will be astounded by the car models and amaze to the incredibly realistic way they take damage, right down to paint being flicked off. Even the dust coming off the tires during the replays is worthy of praise. And the racing itself is just fantastic, with wonderful course design and a real feeling of driving on different road surfaces. I don't see how they could do much better before the next round of systems.

Michael Hobbs A-

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: September

"Full online play, however, is the big news, and while it has some issues, it gets the job done."





Not even the hard steering option can get you out of the mess shown below.









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REVOLUTIONARY "AT-ONCE TURN SYSTEM" (ATS)

A turn-based style of gameplay where actions are executed rapidly, and faster actions are given priority. Since enemy actions and equipment have all been assigned speeds, there is a greater strategic element to battles.

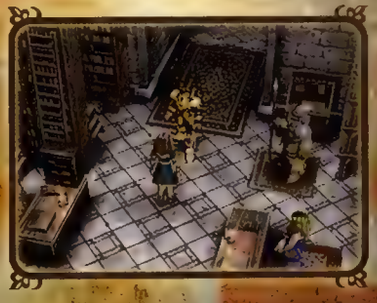
PROGRESS THROUGH A MYSTERIOUS DUNGEON

Search for treasure chests, discover exotic items, and find keys to unlock dungeon doors in your quest to save Ki.

RE-ENTER THE WORLD OF DRUAGA

Guide Gil through strategy-filled turn-based battles featuring a host of familiar monsters from the world of Druaga, including slimes, blue knights and Quox.





THE NIGHTMARE OF
DRUAGA
Fushigino dungeon

EVERYONE
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language

PlayStation 2

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TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2

Too much thug in the THUG?

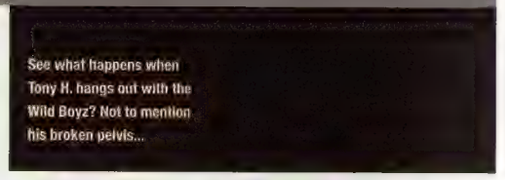
THUG 2 is what you get when a team makes so many sequels they become completely unhinged. No sooner than we're greeted with The Doors' "Break on Through," a one-time religious requiem for flower power, now the intro for an interactive exercise in toilet humor, we find ourselves knee-deep in a cross between the antics of MTV's misfit madmen from *Viva La Bam* and *Wildboyz*—a crazed world-type action game seemingly designed over shots of tequila and bits and pieces of the now countless iterations of Tony Hawk. Talk about a mixed bag—from a visual standpoint, the series is by far at its best, exhibiting newfound polish in literally every facet of the graphics—aside from in-game models that remain as seam-laden and warped as ever—while on the gameplay side, many of the "wacky" components handle so poorly it's a wonder the game is actually considered sellable. Street racing the real-time equivalent of South Park's Timmy while strapped to a V8 on wheels may sound enticing, but when it has all the nuances of a bowling ball, it's little more than an excuse to be crude. And so it goes as the game spirals deeper and deeper into its shock reality-show guise, each passing city a playground of the absurd where completing laundry lists has evolved into an excursion rooted in team play as varied as Phil Margera's fat rolls.

Bouts of bad behavior distributed between T. Hawk-style fun, the highs and lows of the THUG 2 experience truly boggle the mind with various goals so flawed in execution it feels as if the programmers passed out on their keyboards. What was already fractured action (once off the board, these are among the worst-controlling characters in all of gaming) is now crude to the core. How a developer can go from such highs to sinking lows in the same environments bends the mind, especially with environments as awesome as these. It's as if they had to keep adding weirdness to the mix just to stay awake. Then again, these guys could make a traditional Tony Hawk game in their sleep... Strap Steve-O to a rolling mechanical bull with no regard for physics or collision and I suppose that's worth a trip to Starbucks. Bottom line: someone needs to rescue NeverSoft if not the world from this franchise. If developers and publishers want to make multi-faceted games, I'm all for it, but I believe they need to take the time to make each facet of gameplay at least good. As much as this is the deepest Tony Hawk game ever—incorporating crazy levels of customization from characters to actual parks, tricks and missions, online gameplay, the ability to map your own visage onto your skater and much more—it's also as rough around the edges as any game I've ever played, and privy to some of the worst art I've ever seen.

Apparently the big three will approve anything with Tony Hawk's name affixed to it, the result of which is a cornucopia of silliness with moments of brilliance, which in the case may just be apropos. I'm still waiting for someone to take on the other side of skating, the spiritual side that made it such a huge part of my life, and make me a game I can truly celebrate. **Dave Halverson C+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: NeverSoft
Publisher: Activision
Available: October

"...the game spirals deeper and deeper into its shock reality-show guise, each passing city a playground of the absurd..."











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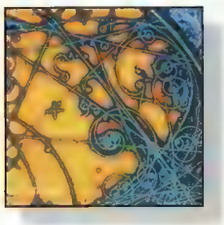
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GODZILLA
Save the Earth

Emergency, emergency! Godzilla is approaching!





That the most renowned and revered movie monster in the history of the world, Godzilla, happens to be a rubber suit is a testament to the ingenuity and imagination of Toho Co., which has managed to hold their rubber creation close to the vest now for 50 years. In a singular lapse in judgment, they did give in to the trappings of the West once, only to watch Roland Emmerich turn their lumbering menace into a Hummer-headed pregnant Iguana with a conscience, but since, all has been well in miniature-land. In the wake of the turd Emmerich laid, the antidote, *Godzilla 2000*—the start of the millennium series—flew in swiftly, carrying three films to help erase the pain, with the king of all 'Zilla flicks, *Godzilla Final Wars*, waiting in the wings.

Since piercing the veil of 3D gaming, it's been a tumultuous ride for Godzilla on the video game side: the first Dreamcast game was a bust, the second was awesome (Godzilla Generations) but no one cared, and then came Atari's Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee, which was decent enough but missed the mark as far as capturing the true essence of Toho's vast rubber-suited army. Their follow up, Godzilla: Save the Earth, not only completely remedies that, but Pipeworks has actually managed to put up an incredibly well-made and balanced fighter in its own right to boot, paying as much or more attention to the balance and technique as they have the visuals, which now border on perfection, given the respective technology. Forging the battles on a story that finds an alien queen attempting to heist Godzilla's G-cells to clone monsters and take over the Earth, the single-player campaigns are among the most rewarding I've encountered since the old Street Fighter days. Using a simple, intuitive control scheme composed of single button and directional combinations, together with a mélange of projectiles and total freedom, Save the Earth is both incredibly fun and, as you ascend in rank and open up wave after wave of monsters and extras, extremely sticky and rewarding. In the more difficult ranks, having mastered my monsters of choice, I had three-to-four-minute battles repeatedly come down to a sliver of energy on both sides vs. the AI, which is a testament to the tuning that's gone into the game; considering that the urban sprawls and dense cities themselves are as formidable is just too cool. Major props go out to Pipeworks on the single, dual, four-player and Live aspects of this game and, most of all, completely nailing the essence of the Godzilla pride, of which very few monsters are left out. The fighting manages to feel nimble while still providing a sense of awesome scale, which had to be an extremely hard balance to strike.

> "The fighting manages to feel nimble while still providing a sense of awesome scale, which had to be an extremely hard balance to strike."



Elsewhere, the game is also, unfortunately in my opinion, replete with silly minigames, which I rather loathe. Seeing these monsters play basketball really turned my stomach. An exercise in wasted time (well, for the most part...some of them are okay), what's worse is that they exist in lieu of what was to be the coolest aspect of this sequel: an action mode where you controlled Godzilla in missions similar to Godzilla Generations. Apparently the team ran out of time to flesh this out, but it would have been damn cool. So will we get to have our rubber suit and wear it too the third time around? Judging from my interview with brand manager Scott McCarthy and executive producer Peter Wyse, it would certainly seem so.

Dave Halverson B+

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Pipeworks
Publisher: Atari
Available: September



Interview
Scott McCarthy, brand manager, and **Peter Wyse**, executive producer, Atari

play: When faced with the task of making a fighting game based on *Godzilla*, is the first dilemma whether to make a game that plays and feels like men in rubber suits or the monstrosities they're attempting to emulate? You seem to have chosen a combination of both. As such, you've justifiably (and adeptly) taken liberties with the monsters, giving them nimble moves while adhering to their film personas and the immense feel of the battles. What types of challenges did you face to achieve this balance?
Godzilla: Save the Earth faces many of the same challenges of any great fighting game, including the necessity to create a balanced roster of characters. Allowing one character (in this case, monster) to dominate all or a majority of others is the first sign of an unbalanced game and a game that is ultimately not fun. How many times have you sat down to fight a friend in a fighting game and they say, "You can be anyone—except him"? In a good fighting game, any two advanced players should be able to take any character and fight competitively against one another. Granted, some fighting styles may be harder to master, but learning the skills, strengths and weaknesses of the characters is part of the fun.

With Godzilla: Save the Earth, we worked closely with both Pipeworks and Toho and came up with a move list that pushed the boundaries of what these monsters could do. The next step was to boil the full move list down to fight moves that best fit each character. And lastly, we spent a good deal of time balancing the moves so that each monster had unique moves and strengths and weaknesses but no single monster was more powerful than the others. How do you get a multi-weapon behemoth like Space Godzilla to be competitive with the scrappy fighting style of Baragon? How do you make Mothra competitive in both larval and moth forms? These are the questions that were asked of Pipeworks from the onset, and I think you'll find that they've answered those questions and then some.

Okay, you can stop saying Godzilla: Save the Earth now. And then there are the environments themselves. It must be extremely difficult to properly calibrate so many elements—making cars appear and react realistically amidst towering structures being demolished and such... And what an amazing job you've done. The end product feels incredibly well tuned.
Thanks. The tuning phase was the longest part of the production schedule and something that Pipeworks spent a lot of time, energy and long nights to get right. The engine that Pipeworks has developed actually makes these cities less of a challenge to "get off the ground" than you might think. Any building can be generated and placed anywhere on a map area; the real challenge is to get the buildings, vehicles, tanks and helicopters to act the way they are supposed to, and I think you'll find as you play, that they do.

I also noticed that you've given the monsters slope/location-sensitive stances, which, considering the complexity of the arenas, is beyond commendable. Seeing Godzilla prop one leg up with the other in a canal, I couldn't believe the level of polish you've achieved. Elsewhere, the effects and special touches (like the tunneling animation—even underwater) are outstanding. How much of the dev time has been spent on sweating the details?
These monsters not only need to react to one another but, unlike most fighting games, react to the environment they are fighting in—it is truly dynamic at every angle. At any given moment, a monster can be thrown in any direction, thus manipulating any building. Because of this, the monsters need to be seen as part of the environment, not just a piece of it. Their reaction to each other is also part of the tuning process. Getting monsters to look and act like they are opposing forces is something that takes many different people to get right, from programmers to artists to motion capture specialists; each one plays a vital role in the look and feel of monster reactions.

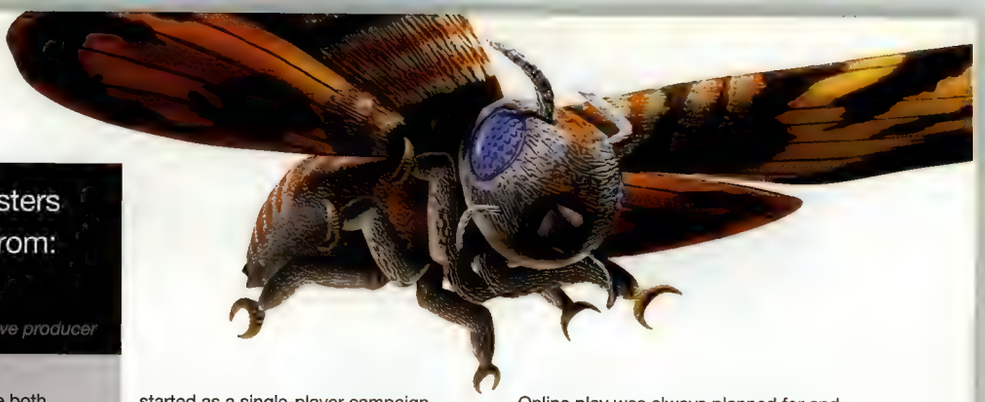
You certainly didn't sacrifice the gameplay. Given the subject matter, the AI and balance is extraordinary. This is a great fighting game. On medium difficulty I can't tell you how many battles (long 2-3 minute battles) came down to a sliver of energy. Was that priority one—to make a great fighter?



"Not only does Godzilla need to be a great fighting game, but it also needs to be a great Godzilla game, by yourself or against a human opponent..."
Scott McCarthy, brand manager, and Peter Wyse, executive producer







"...I think we have a *lot* of the fan-favorite monsters in here. In fact, that's where the line-up came from: the fans."

-Scott McCarthy, brand manager, and Peter Wyse, executive producer

Yes, the overarching goal was to make a great fighter. But that's not all there is to *Godzilla*, is there? Not only does *Godzilla* need to be a great fighting game, but it also needs to be a great *Godzilla* game, by yourself or against a human opponent, off and online. This means that every movement, from walking down the street to throwing a punch to firing a beam weapon, needs to always immerse the player in the *Godzilla* universe. The balancing effort between monsters that we spoke about above helps us achieve this. We often find that between players in the office—all of whom are quite skilled—it comes down to a sliver of energy and who can use a strong move the right way at the right time.

I can't remember the last fighting game I cared about enough to point out (or even notice) the "cheap" stuff, but at the end of a few of those close battles (Mecha-King Gidorah is one serious contender), my computer-assisted opponent would conveniently find a health vial. That ain't right! I'm surprised how aware the AI is of the various vials...they run 'em down like monster crack. Is this deliberate or just a random command?
This is deliberate. The monsters that Godzilla is fighting have been brainwashed into trying to destroy the earth by the Vortaak! Following the storyline, the Vortaak are dropping the health, energy and rage power-ups to benefit your enemies and destroy the Earth, not to help you. We hope that the alien-assistance doesn't feel too much like you're getting "cheaped." What we were aiming for was an immersive world where aliens and monsters work together to destroy the world, and it's up to you and the awesome force of Godzilla, or whatever monster you're playing, to stop them. Hopefully, you'll notice the power-ups getting dropped and intercept them before the Queen of the Vortaak, Vorticia, has her way!

I'm both amazed at the selection of monsters on hand, and moreover how well represented they are, compared to the last game (Destroy All Monsters), which was cool, but not this cool. Has Toho been open-minded with the game development, or have you had to fight for every inch?
Because of the success of the original game and the awareness it brought to the franchise as a whole, Toho has been very receptive to the new ideas for Godzilla: Save the Earth. Toho will *always* be vigilant in maintaining the authentic look and quality of the monsters and the license as a whole. That being said, they have been open to more of Atari and Pipeworks' ideas on improving gameplay to please both.

Even though you had me at Space Godzilla (thank you for him/it) and the additions of Baragon and Godzilla 2000, I was really hoping to see Godzilla 2000's Orga 1 & 2. They hiding in here anywhere?
I won't say "no," but you are going to have to dig pretty far into the challenge modes in order to find how Orga's different forms are represented. They are there—now go find them!

Where's Gamera?! You know we have to have Gamera, right? Tell me he's in here. Toho has only *just* acquired the Gamera license.
Pipeworks started the game design of Save the Earth at the launch of the GameCube title. At that time, Atari could not legally include Gamera in the line-up so...I know...I know...I want him too, but I think we have a *lot* of the fan-favorite monsters in here. In fact, that's where the line-up came from: the fans. All of the monsters in Save the Earth are the most requested monsters that Atari could acquire the rights to. So while there's no Gamera, I am confident a line-up that includes Jet Jaguar, Mothra, Baragon, Space Godzilla and Mechagodzilla will not disappoint. Besides—we wanted to give you something to look forward to.

I wouldn't mind going into battle as the Hummer-headed Emmerich Godzilla either. The movie might have sucked, but that was one cool lizard. You consider inviting him or does that pose a roll of red tape?
More red tape than you want to read about...

In *Godzilla Against Mechagodzilla*, Kiryu has shoulder-mounted cannons, yet I didn't see them in the game. Any reason for the omission?
Because there are a limited amount of moves each monster can execute, we prioritized our wish list and the shoulder mounted cannons didn't make the cut for balancing reasons. But we added homing missiles, which are equally cool—plus it's fun to watch your opponent run around a city trying to lose the missiles as they home in.

You've introduced a single-player campaign mode to thwart the Vortaak alien queen's quest for G-cells, but it's pretty much just a vs. arcade mode. What happened to the proposed 3D action campaign akin with Godzilla Generations?
The challenge modes in the game actually started as a single-player campaign that was viewed from the third-person perspective. In order to get the online play and re-vamped fighting system done to the fun factor Pipeworks and Atari want to achieve, the idea of traditional story progression was tabled and the challenges were created. To that point, there are challenges that (for instance) take Moguera from behind the moon, through an asteroid field, battling aliens, and eventually fighting the crystal form of Space Godzilla.

As a fan, I wanted the single-player action *waaaaay* more than online. Why am I paying for it?
We're talking about two separate issues. Online play was always planned for and did not detract from or distract from our implementation of the game. It was simply that we did not want to put out a single-player campaign that did not deliver an amazing experience. We would much rather leave you wanting more than deliver a disappointing single-player experience.

Okay...I'll expect more then the next time. You now owe us a Godzilla action game. Imagining what that might look like on Xenon or PS3 is an exciting proposition. So, you'll begin right away then?
Uh... What? I didn't hear you... You're breaking up... Huh??? **play**





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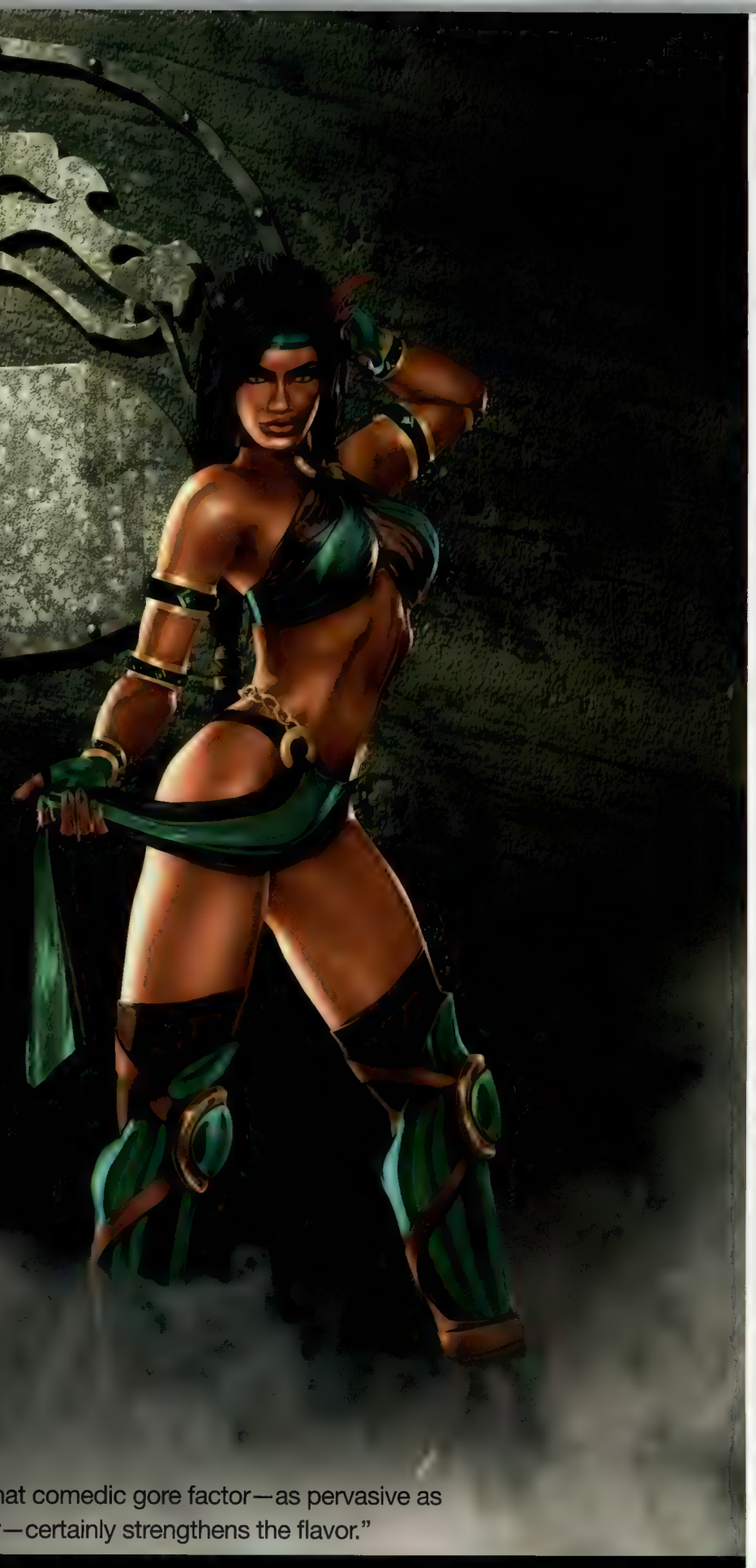
PlayStation.2

RPG

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Mortal Kombat



MK fans, clear your calendar year

Come on, admit it: a) Mortal Kombat wasn't very good, and b) we all loved it to bloody pieces. Fast forward 12 years, a few kids, a wife or two, college graduation and a new way of looking at video games and it becomes clear: spinal mutilation is so over.

Yeah, right. All you need is Scorpion once again demanding your opponent to "Get over here!" and the love returns. But indeed much has changed, and if that ferocious scream wasn't followed by some kick-ass fighting and impressively sophisticated visuals, we'd be retiring the controller long before we cared to input some sloppy commands just to see how cool Raiden's electrocution looks in bold 3D.

Mortal Kombat: Deception shares some move sets and certainly the unmistakable tone and style of the earlier games, but now we have a more refined, deeply strategic, superbly constructed fighting game. Pumping up the energy and expanding the sense of space and visual appeal, destructible exit points open up new tiers in the arena. Most fighters also have a set of weapons to turn to for additional style and power.

Instantly familiar to anyone who dug into last year's Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance, Deception is more or less a big extension with some very important additions. A huge boost to the central fighting mechanic is the Breaker counter, which allows you to halt an onslaught of combos—an especially involving, critical technique against a human opponent, and a nice boost to a less rigidly technical, more reactionary mode of fighting.

As good as the match-ups are, balanced through a generous, likeable collection of 24 old and new warriors, that comedic gore factor—as pervasive as ever—certainly strengthens the flavor. Fatalities aren't just resigned to finishing moves, either; environmental hazards entertainingly become instant traps of death, adding yet another dimension to the combat, and now you can even perform a suicide before your opponent gets a chance to do the dirty work for you; original co-

"...that comedic gore factor—as pervasive as ever—certainly strengthens the flavor."



Puzzle Kombat

It's awfully familiar, but don't be surprised if you find yourself logging insane hours here. There's nothing ingenious about the design, just great, classic fun.







creator Ed Boon deserves credit for maintaining a sense of humor while staying away from the vile.

Like the borderline-kitsch brand of comic-book art style that builds the professional-grade visuals, all the absurd violence doesn't stick like it did in the olden days. But there is so much meat filling in around the core brawling, I can't imagine not being less than perfectly satisfied with what is unquestionably the best version of Mortal Kombat. A true, continuing fan will be thrilled for months. And beating Dead or Alive to the punch, it's the first online 3D fighter, with every mode available; score tracking hearkens back to the intense competition sparked back when the series stormed arcades.

Also available for network play are three entirely unique side games. In Puzzle Kombat, pint-sized combatants pummel each other in response to stacked colored blocks being destroyed by like-colored detonators, which send clutter into the opponent's space; think Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo, with super attacks and not as good. In Chess Kombat, the setup we're used to is toyed with but maintained strategically enough, as taking spaces, using magic and setting traps inevitably revolve around a subsequent victory in a fighting arena. And finally, in the diverting Konquest Mode, you take your character, Shujinko, from child to adulthood through an MK-inspired world, where you train, meet people, advance a story and earn rewards—including the use of a very powerful Shujinko in the main arena. If there's a more ambitious fighter out there, I certainly haven't played it. **Brady Fiechter** B+



Look familiar? Fans will feel right at home.

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: October



Fable

Once upon a time on Xbox



Choices are a rarity in video games. Even when they do exist, they are ultimately linked to elementary conclusions; a fork in the road leading to a different iteration here, an answer that might send you into battle there. KOTOR rubbed up against real-time good vs. evil, but Fable is the first game to imbed it in every pixel, creating a unique experience for all comers and no less than the evolution of the RPG…in theory. Apparently Pandora's box was so difficult to slam shut that well over four years of development has amounted to well under 20 hours worth of gameplay, should you choose the streamlined path, partaking only in those missions required to finish. On the other hand (and the way I feel BBB intended the game to be played), to truly sop up all of the programming and garner the full breadth of the Fable experience, you're looking at well over 30 hours per game, of which you can play numerous ways with countless variations on each. In a way, Fable is as long or short as you want it to be—yet another sign of how innovative it really is. A prime example would be, say, if you wanted to marry the mayor of Brimstone after winning in the arena to score the sweet dowry, the keys to the royal manor and, of course, bragging rights that you scored the hottest blonde in the game. Depending on where you're at as a character, winning her hand in marriage (which includes the right gift, a measure of exploration and taking on her other suitor) can take upwards of two hours, and there are countless such scenarios in the game, not including the many side quests, fishing and digging spots, etc.

Fable begins in standard enough fashion—your village is burned and family brutally murdered, leaving you, a helpless child, alone in the world—but from there it becomes a journey of self-expression. Raised up by a neighboring guild, your youth is spent training to become a hero skilled in all manner of combat, magic and stealth, of which you can focus your mastery in either of the three. Once you leave the guild to embark on your personal journey, Fable becomes dependant on you…and let me tell you, this is the wave of the future. At its core, Fable is composed of missions and sub-missions dispatched as reports of unrest flow into the guild. It's how you carry them out that matters, as well as what you do otherwise. Choose the path of good and you will be greeted by accolades and celebration; choose a career of evil and you'll be met with hisses and scowled at wherever you go; or choose lurk in the shadows and experience neither. In short, you reap what you sow in Fable, and the world reflects it. How free is it? Well, I wandered into a house (as is common practice in RPGs) to flip open a chest and was asked to please leave. When I didn't, the magistrate was called and I was asked to pay a fine. I declined and figured I'd just kill them all (in compliance with proper game etiquette) and be done with it. However, with every blow the fine soared and reinforcements arrived until I was overwhelmed. So, as is customary, I proceeded to just leave and come back, hence resetting the scenario, Metal Gear-style. I entered a nearby warp and figured that was that… Wrong again. Upon my return through the warp, they were actually waiting. There was no way around it. Even if I paid the fine now, the infraction would have a major impact on my credibility. I quickly reloaded my last save—point taken. Another time, in the town of Brimstone, a random man led me on a wild goose chase to win an introduction with his daughter. After spending much time and money to appear as she supposedly desired, he informed me what a boob I was as he didn't even have a daughter. Normally I'd have, of course, killed him, but…I have a reputation to uphold (so I farted on him instead), not to mention a wife in Brimstone. He insulted me and gave me a monkey tattoo and I was on my way (sporting a handlebar moustache no less), off to fix my hair. I'm still finding crazy things all over Fable, most recently discovering a way to actually shave years off of my life. While all of these little gems are ultimately scripted, it's













"Once you leave the guild to embark on your personal journey, Fable becomes dependant on you...and let me tell you, this is the wave of the future."

Oh, lookie there: his head's come clean off. He



how many and how random they are that makes Fable such a replayable treat.

Whether you choose to let missions wait and just roam (which amazingly the townsfolk will be aware of, reminding you often you are needed elsewhere in passing) or play it completely anti-social, Fable is an open book with visuals as awe-inspiring as its self-expression. Entering a dark wood as the thunder claps and rain pours down—the storybook music by Danny Elfman enchanting every step—it's difficult to describe just how well Fable burrows under your skin. Big Blue Box knows how to press our buttons and do so as if we're puppets on a string. As moody and dark as sections of the world are, the contrasting fairy tale aspects are just as inspired, and the action—lock-on fighting and archery with all of the trimmings—is at its instinctive best. All around you the world is alive, rife with near-perfect water (much of which you can fish), waving brush, bustling villages, pesky nomads, nosy townsfolk and storybook monstrosities, all splendidly modeled and vocalized.

If Fable has any flaws, it's that ultimately the core story weighs in on the trite and underdeveloped side, and that due to the complexity of it all, the protagonist must remain silent—completely reactive. I found the entire game utterly fascinating, but did find key twists somewhat disappointing.

Fable is everything I hoped this generation of consoles would bring. That it has arrived on the tail end of the current generation is indicative of how little time we really get with each passing machine. With the foundation laid, an Xbox sequel (it sold 375,000 copies week one, so a sequel is assured) might only take a couple of years, but with new technology just over the horizon, who knows when the next chapter will arrive? With any luck, as soon as BC is completed, Big Blue Box (as a piece of the Lionhead Studios pie, they'll likely have a hand in buttoning up MGS's next life-altering epic) will get to work on a sequel for this generation, beginning in time to have something to show or at least announce at next year's E3, where the next generation will be on display for the first time. In the meantime, I'll play through Fable many times over through the course of the next few months. Between my usual regimens, this will be the game that lives in my Xbox, along with Halo 2, of course, as MGS begins its utter assault on our waking lives. Beyond Fable and Halo 2 lie BC, Kameo, Conker and Jade Empire—arguably the best first-party lineup ever assembled within a six-month period. I can't remember a better time to be a gamer. Let's hope it holds. Big Blue Box has certainly done their part. **Dave Halverson** **A-**

System: Xbox
Developer: Big Blue Box
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: September



Blood Will Tell

In Tezuka we trust

Blood Will Tell is an important part of this year's mass of Q4 PS2 offerings for many reasons: not only is it one of the richest, well-laid and detailed action games to come out of Japan in years, it's also the first original Sega title, since they stopped making hardware, that exhibits the kind of gameplay that made them a household name back when Shinobi ruled the ninja action roost. What *Rurouni Kenshin* and *Ninja Scroll* are to anime, Blood Will Tell is now to gaming: a deep, thought-provoking and endlessly fascinating trek through feudal Japan, mired in pockets of mysticism and story that never stop rewarding the player.

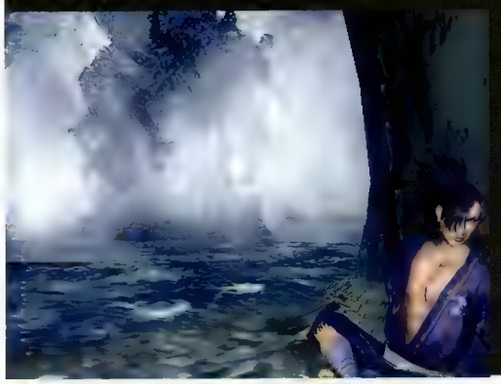
With evolving play mechanics spread between Hyakkimaru and Dororo (each are assigned key roles linked through a telepathic union), it's like Mystic Defender and old Shinobi rolled into one, replete with the best dialogue perhaps ever for a Sega game. It's also incredibly huge, without ever becoming tiring. If you like your games long, this may be among the biggest action games ever in terms of hours, storyline and bosses. Robbed of his body parts as an infant, bit by bit, fiend after fiend, Hyakkimaru fights for every organ, nerve and bone in his body. Reclaiming his humanity will take everything he, Dororo and you have, and isn't that what gaming is all about? Here we have a massive, rich, painfully detailed trek that embodies swordplay, layer upon layer of melee fighting, platforming, exploration and boss fighting set amongst authentic-looking townships, countrysides, ravines, temples and more. Not to mention a story…not some recycled piece of crap, but a real story, penned by a master (Osamu Tezuka). This is what I signed on for when I agreed to the trappings of 3D. While it's not perfection—the game suffers from a lack of walking animation and more loading than I prefer—it's a real adventure, content in operating within the confines of its genre, doing what's expected of it very well rather than relying on vehicles, mini games, pop-culture clichés or a movie license to hold its audience. Remember when that was the standard? If not, come check this out. You may find it eminently more rewarding than popping a cap in whatever ass you happen to be aiming at.

With any luck, the rest of the press will get this one right and Sega will have its second viable new franchise going into the next generation. We need a healthy Sega and Nintendo now more than ever, as slowly and steadily the industry continues to unravel, giving in to the illusion that movie tie-ins and shock value are the only means of success. Original titles are still the lifeblood of this industry, and games like Blood Will Tell taken to even further depths on the next round of hardware will help keep the gamers that got us here in the game. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sega WOW/Red Company/Tezuka Productions
Publisher: Sega
Available: September

"...bit by bit, fiend after fiend, Hyakkimaru fights for every organ, nerve and bone in his body."

There are more nasty demons in BWT than any 10 games combined.







Interview

Answered collectively by **Masamoto Morita**, main planner, and **Yuji Horikawa**, producer

"...we definitely didn't want to diverge from the theme of the original Tezuka material."

-Masamoto Morita and Yuji Horikawa

play: Of all Osamu Tezuka's works, what attracted you to Dororo in particular to make into a video game?
Out of all of the Tezuka properties, Dororo seemed particularly suitable to make into a video game. Having to slay the 48 fiends one by one to win back parts of your body is very RPG-esque, and since Hyakkimaru's body itself is incorporated with all of these bizarre weapons, it allowed for a different sort of action from the typical samurai game.

Do you think that works like Rurouni Kenshin and Ninja Scroll borrowed from the Tezuka formula? Did their popularity in the States factor into the decision to adapt this material in particular?
Osamu Tezuka's creations are extraordinarily major parts of Japanese manga history. It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that Osamu Tezuka effectively created the modern Japanese manga style. So, Japanese manga like Rurouni Kenshin most definitely display this sort of influence.

Did you derive all of the characters from the Weekly Shonen Sunday serial or also from the TV series that followed?
We based our thoughts on the original manga (of which there are several versions), the TV anime series and also the Dororo novels (of which there are also several versions), and kept them all in mind during the creative process. The characters' personalities are based on the manga. We made Hyakkimaru a little bit older than he was in the manga, and we based the details of his internal weapons on things that the novels hinted at.

Since the serial was never finished, does this game carry over into Dororo Part II or will you end on a cliffhanger and consider a sequel?
The game is an original story based on the original series which ties into its own ending, after Hyakkimaru has defeated all of the 48 fiends.

The game obviously warrants sequels. Is that the hope/plan, or was Blood Will Tell planned as a one-shot due to the lack of further material?
If the fans have enough interest in it, I think we might look into a sequel. However, this is an original, self-contained and complete story on its own.

Did you take any liberties with the characters or

demons adapting them to the game world, or do they appear and act as they did in the manga (or TV series) throughout?
We didn't feel like we absolutely *had* to be faithful to the original material. However, for characters like Banzai, Tatari and Nihiru, as well as many of the demons that appear in the original, who have such a strong presence, we definitely wanted to include that in the game.

Tezuka was a brilliant storyteller. Did you find it especially challenging translating the feel of the manga into an interactive experience? Was there a sense of responsibility in translating the work into the interactive realm?
First, we developed the plot, and then we decided which parts of the story we wanted to tell via cutscenes, and which parts we wanted to convey through action sequences. For example, we wanted to make sure that there was at least one part in each chapter where the player got to control Dororo, and based decisions on things like that. And also, while we did create our own story for the game, we definitely didn't want to diverge from the theme of the original Tezuka material.

Given the macabre nature of the fable, did you find yourself walking a fine line between the adventure and horror aspects of the game? You manage to keep things pretty light-spirited considering the story's pervading sense of physical pain and suffering.
The game concept didn't have "frighten the player" in mind. As you pointed out, this isn't a horror title, like Resident Evil, but rather, our aim was for an action game with a sort of horror "flair" to it. Also, since the theme of the hero's internal conflict and suffering was very important to the story, we wanted to arrange things so that this could be easily conveyed to and grasped by the player.

Taking into account the two playable characters and their vastly different styles, the number of events and interactive characters within the game, and the immensity of the ever-changing world as they forge ahead, Blood Will Tell seems incredibly ambitious. How large a team is this and how long has this project taken?
I could cite concrete numbers, but suffice it to say that we had many people who helped make some of Sega's top-class games working on this project. We feel that the sheer diversity of that can be felt in the gameplay experience.

The main character models are especially impressive; the robes, and the upper torsos, especially around the neck, are remarkably detailed. Yet I don't see where anything has been sacrificed to achieve this. Did you take extra care in getting your models just right in concert with the lush surroundings?
The heart of the character is in the face, so we took special care in detailing those. I think that we did a good job of reproducing that certain touch from the character designs done by Hiroaki Samura. They weren't really designed to specifically coordinate with the backgrounds and scenery, but we worked hard on things like overall color balance to make sure that everything harmonized well in the end.

The CG is truly exquisite. Was this done in-house? Did you consult any medical professionals to create the contortions?
Our CG was done by one of our most valued production companies, and we went back and forth with details throughout the entire creative process. In the part, the designers examined photographs of the human form. We also had people studying medical texts and manuals to make sure that details were accurate.

I really like the automatic camera lock mechanism during boss battles. Anything in particular influence this?
The basic concept was to really show that the bosses, these fiends, were much more powerful enemies than your typical mooks. Originally, boss battles used the normal game camera, but due to the enemies' size, it became very difficult to actually play. So, looking at the largest bosses with a little trial and error to develop something that made gameplay easy and fun, we came to the current camera system.

This was the first time I'd ever fought a mountain... Did you find battles of this nature particularly challenging to translate into the gamespace?
The idea to have an entire mountain as an enemy was something that was in the game plan from the very beginning. We felt that this was a great idea for showing just how huge some of these fiends could be. Still, it was pretty complicated, trying to figure out exactly how to make a fiend like this, to show off this feeling of sheer enormity. Ultimately, we decided on having an entire map where Hyakkimaru and Dororo would destroy parts of the enemy as they went along, but in the end, a chapter like that just took too long to complete. Still, the end result of our "mountain fiend" is something that I'm satisfied with.

The English translation/voice acting may be Sega's best ever. Did SOA oversee the localization or was the localization a co-venture?
I'm extremely happy to hear that opinion from a native speaker! Sega of America carried out the localization. For the English voice recording, the scenario writer and the director flew over from Japan to the U.S. to help oversee things. Sega of America took great care in translating a lot of text, ensuring its accuracy and keeping the nuances of the words and voice acting in the English product. We Japanese look at the final product, and we can trust that the charm of the scenario is conveyed more than adequately for the localized version.

What are you most proud of about Blood Will Tell?
I'm proud of a lot of things, personally, but I'm sure that everyone on the development staff has their own opinio... too, so I can't speak on t... behalf.

I think that the thing th... keeps this game interesti... and fun is that the story a... system work together as ... cohesive unit. Simply put ... it's a story where you nee... to defeat the fiends to ge... your body back, and it's a ... system that allows you to ... just that. There are a lot o... games that just have figh... to fill in the gap between ... story sequences, and gam... that have story sequences to fill in the spaces between the fighting, and so I think that this game's unique charm is that it combines both of these elements into one unit. With the Japanese release, we got way more feedback than we expected of people saying things like, "I can't stop playing because I want to see what happens next!" and "This story really moved me," which shows the power of the original work, but I think that it's the entirety of the game that makes the main character's emotions so easily conveyed.

Beyond the video game, is there any talk in Japan of perhaps an anime remake?
I haven't heard any concrete plans to that effect. Still, Hiroaki Samura is extremely popular from the character designs that he does, and so I, personally at least, would love to see another Samura-designed remake of something.

Does Sega have rights to other Osamu Tezuka works? We've seen Astro Boy and now Dororo... Might we see more in the future? So many Tezuka serials would make great games...Duke Goblin, The Phoenix, The Crater...
Right now, Sega has the monopoly on creating game adaptations of Tezuka's works. I can't say anything definite about future plans, but there are still plenty of remaining Tezuka properties that have quite a lot of potential to be remade into video games. **play**

"...the theme of the hero's internal conflict and suffering was very important to the story..."

-Masamoto Morita, main planner, and Yuji Horikawa, producer

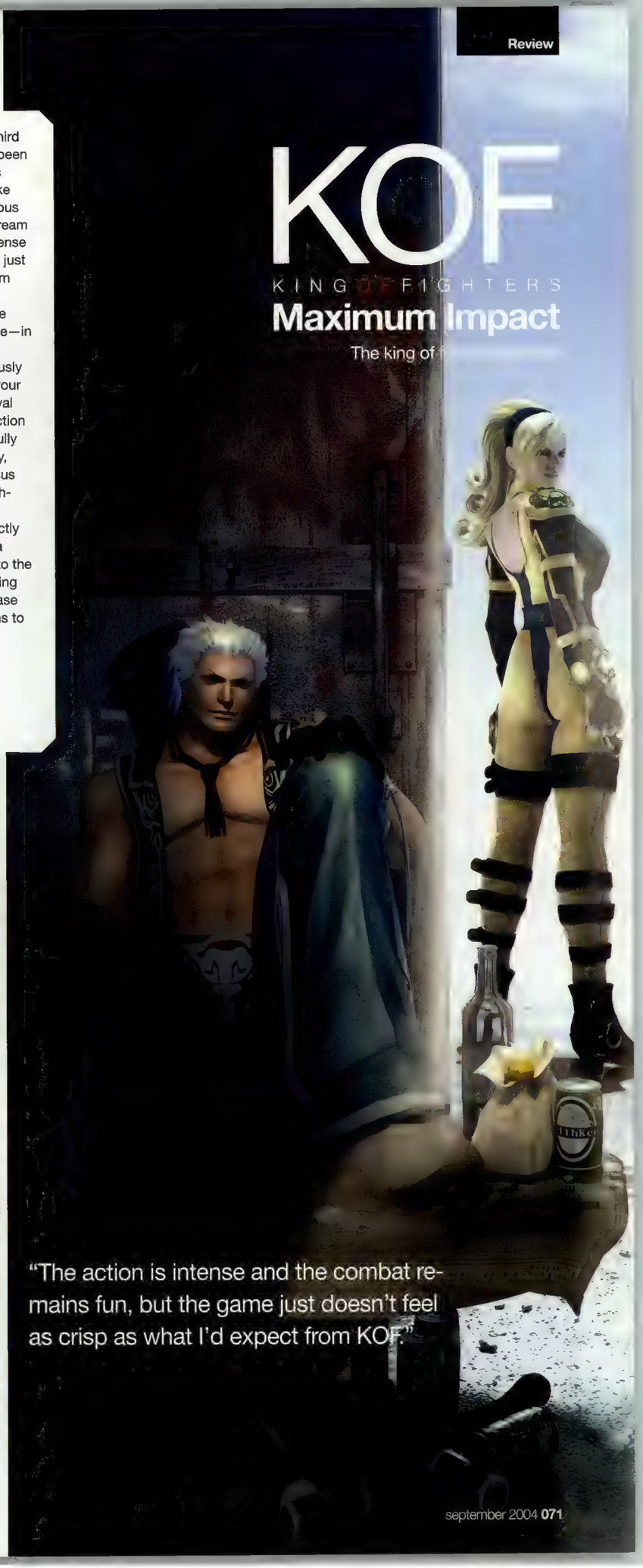




KOF

KING OF FIGHTERS Maximum Impact

The king of



Players who have been following King of Fighters for its 10-year history have always pretty much known what to expect from the series—until now. Offering more than just the requisite new characters and familiar faces from SNK games of old, KOF: Maximum Impact attempts to take SNK's premiere series to a new level by bringing its traditional fighting into the third dimension, resulting in a more mass-market fighter that's nothing if not solid.

It only takes a second to realize that KOF has undergone significant changes. SNK has finally abandoned the charming but hopelessly outdated Neo Geo hardware, and characters are now finally rendered in full 3D. The visuals aren't up to, say, Tekken standards by any stretch of the imagination, but the characters look good, with nice animation and the fantastic classic character designs shining through. Each fighter comes complete with a second optional model, and some of the modern makeovers the characters have received are rather impressive, if not startling. And yes, if you're wondering, Mai is still as bouncy as ever—bouncier, actually, to the point of being unnaturally freakish. In fact, the whole female cast seems to be giving the DOA girls a run for their money in terms of audaciousness. My, how little Yuri and Athena have grown.

While the gameplay still retains the basic feel of classic KOF games, where jumping attacks still have a place of prominence and flashy, familiar special moves explode across the screen, characters can now dodge in the third dimension, and a new combo system has been implemented. It's here where longtime fans may cry foul; the dial-up style combos make Maximum Impact less technical than previous games and open the door for more mainstream button-mashing mayhem. The action is intense and the combat remains fun, but the game just doesn't feel as crisp as what I'd expect from KOF.

A few other areas could have used some extra polish as well. The game's story mode—in which the only "story" is between-fight cutscenes featuring one of the most hideously designed characters ever explaining who your next opponent is—is misguided, the removal of three-on-three battles as the main attraction is unfortunate, and the voice acting (now fully in English) is as cheesy as ever. Fortunately, team battles remain for exhibition and versus play, and a mission mode adds some much-appreciated depth.

KOF: Maximum Impact may not be exactly what I want from King of Fighters, but it's a good first attempt at bringing the series into the modern era and an all-around decent fighting game. Hopefully the strides made to increase the game's accessibility will draw more fans to this venerable series. **Chris Hoffman** **B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: SNK Playmore
Publisher: SNK Neo Geo USA
Available: October

"The action is intense and the combat remains fun, but the game just doesn't feel as crisp as what I'd expect from KOF."

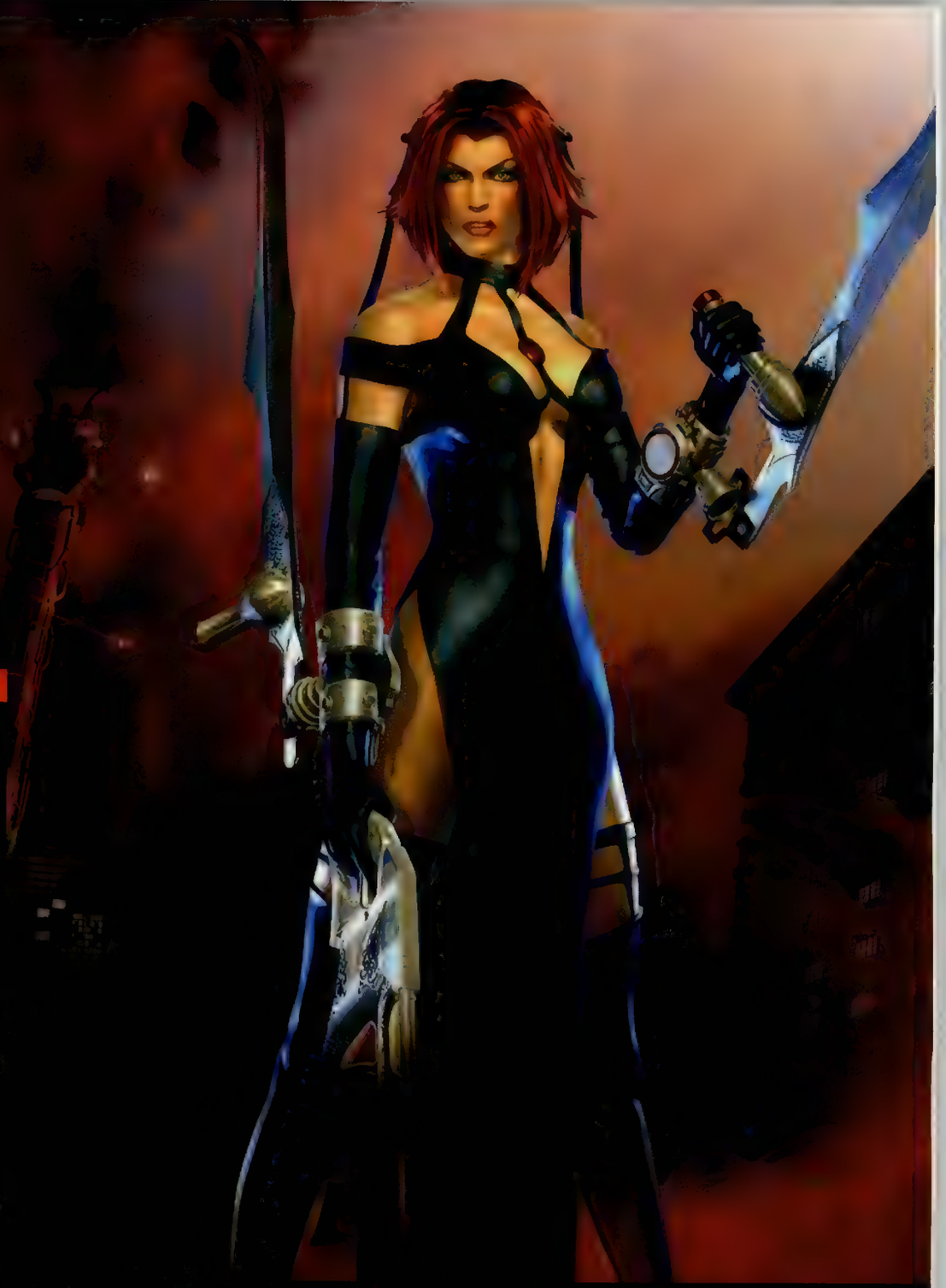
New characters like twin bothers Alba and Soiree are nice additions to the cast of returning favorites.







BloodRayne



Theatre of pain

Playing through BloodRayne 2 makes the realization that Uwe Boll is directing the movie all the more disconcerting (an included trailer has all of the production values of a high school play in which the regal Rayne looks like a homeless wench), as this is a franchise clearly on the rise. But let's put that aside for now and focus on more pleasant thoughts, like arms and heads being hacked off and whole torsos being split down the middle.

What Terminal Reality has managed to create in the two years succeeding the BloodRayne debut borders on miraculous. Having fashioned a solid yet flawed first effort showcasing Rayne in all of her glory as the natural heir to the gaming goddess throne, TR and Majesco have gone to great lengths to up the ante significantly with a sequel so superior you'd swear they jumped developers. Harnessed within 15-plus hours of the bloodiest gameplay on record, BloodRayne 2 offers evolving and intuitive melee fighting rife with assorted methods of hyper-detailed dismemberment: harpoon-based meat puzzles and environment manipulation as you send heavy metal crashing down onto unassuming victims or fling soon-to-be-stew-meat attackers into assorted meat grinders, rail sliding akin to a human deli slicer, more combos and attack variations than you could ever hope to learn, and living guns that give only as they receive—Rayne's blood.

I suppose the closest comparison in terms of game structure would be Tomb Raider, as you essentially move from expanse to expanse, battling enemies and solving environmental puzzles to forge ahead, all the while engaged in a cinematic plight; but where BloodRayne strays from the formula is in both presentation and execution—pun intended. Rayne—aside from being burning hot—is a vocal, ruthless and incredibly pissed off Dhampir scorned, and she's up against a formidable array of opponents. While a measure of Rayne's between-meal snacks still consist of the usual cliché parade of underling thugs used for little more than topping off her tanks (the Nazi guise has been abandoned in favor of a more Blade-like universe), Rayne's family tree is replete with nasty, nimble vampires in servitude of Daddy Kagan—whose demise is her ultimate goal—along with some tricky über-Goth generals: higher ups on the blood-sucker food chain that block and parry with the best of 'em. In BloodRayne, the majority of NPCs served as little more than cattle, but in BloodRayne 2, gun- or weapon-toting opposition requires disarmament, which isn't always easy, as they tend to attack in waves. You can forget about using Blood Rage to easily dispense bosses as well; there's a good measure of tactics in the mix this time around, as you face everything from siblings to a disgusting monstrosity so immense that you'll eventually enter its stomach to rip out its exposed heart. Some of the key confrontations in the game carry on for several minutes, and do-overs are frequent, unlike the first. BloodRayne 2 Tactics might have been a suitable name for this sequel if not for all of the wonderful pole antics and the addition of evolving powers and guns—new toys that help enhance the overall experience.

"...let's focus on more pleasant thoughts, like arms and heads being hacked off and whole torsos being split down the middle."

As improved as BloodRayne 2 is, however, it's not without fault. The game is still just a touch rough around the edges, as Rayne, although vastly improved, still doesn't feel as connected to the environments as she should. She's much improved from the first, and gorgeously animated with added quick-turn animation and a slight lean when you steer dual analog, but still not on par with the cream of the adventure crop. There are some abrupt edits in here too, and a few clumsy scenarios, but on the whole, a few miscues and collision woes seem trite given the dev time, depth of the gameplay and the game's remarkable



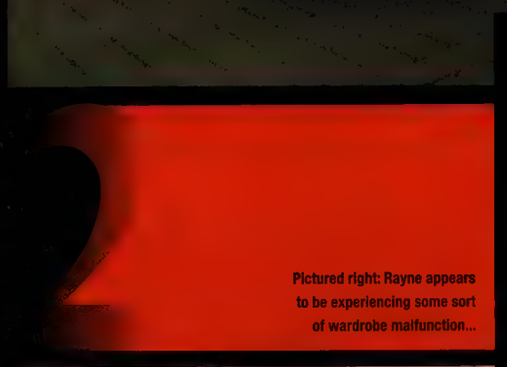




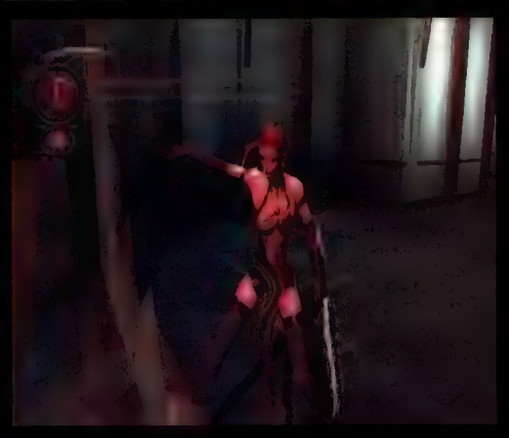
visuals. The models in BR2—every model, that is, from the lowliest thug on up—are spectacularly rendered, and the environments themselves are outstanding, exhibiting the kind of presentation and detail found in only the best games. The same can be said of the CG cinemas—a dazzling array of snippets depicting a grizzly future—nearly every spoken role and the score, which ranks among the best I've heard this year. A few thugs come off like The Jerky Boys, but on the whole, the voice acting is excellent. And as for Rayne herself (especially on Xbox where she's bump mapped), she's simply an exquisite video game character through and through. Speaking of which, when the game is done (awesome ending, by the way; BR3 is going to rule), you get a ton of new outfits including the unspeakably über-excellent Dark Rayne, which prompted me to begin anew.

While my views are based solely on the Xbox version (we didn't get the PS2 game in time, so we'll give it a go next issue), which Majesco has stated is the superior of the two, the PS2 game shouldn't see much degradation beyond texture quality. Until then, if you own an Xbox, do yourself a favor and feed it BloodRayne 2. **Dave Halverson** 8+

System: Xbox (reviewed), PlayStation 2, PC
Developer: Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco
Available: October



Pictured right: Rayne appears to be experiencing some sort of wardrobe malfunction...



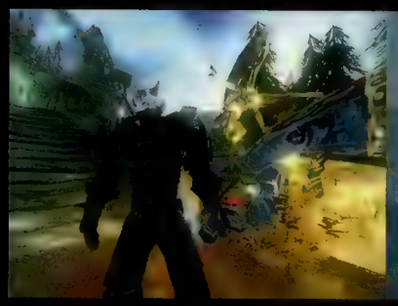




Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent A
Very Good B
Average C
Poor D
Worthless F



Game of the Month

Fable p 066

"Fable is everything I hoped this generation of consoles would bring."

Also notice...



Blood Will Tell
p 070

Osamu Tezuka and Sega come together to help Hyakkimaru put himself back together.



Mortal Kombat: Deception
p 064

Not only is it the best version of Mortal Kombat yet, it's a damn good fighting game – and it's all online.



Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex

Between Production I.G, Mamoro Oshii, SCEJ, Bandai and especially developer cavia, the *Ghost in the Shell* franchise is now privy to yet another work of art, only this time in the interactive realm. Taking on the role of Major Motoko Kusanagi, her cyber-sidekick Batou and even a Tachikoma for a brief interlude, operating within humbling expanses and beautifully detailed environments, Stand Alone Complex injects skillfully deployed melee combat, infiltration, platforming and a wealth of well-honed play mechanics into a sortie-based operation that puts the player on the receiving end of intel direct from Section 9 itself. If you know what that means, you've probably pre-booked already; and if you don't, well, you should. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: cavia
Publisher: Bandai
Available: November



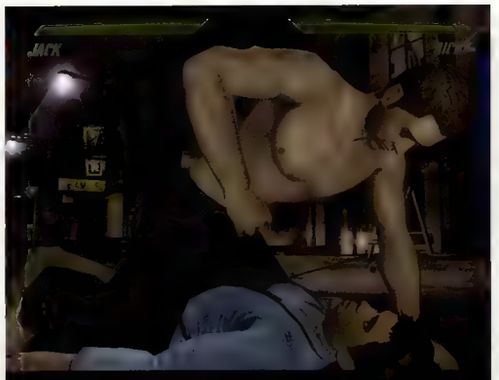
Kusanagi puts the moves on a couple soon-to-be-dead bad guys.



OutRun 2

OutRun 2 is a lot of fun. Like the classic arcade game, you charge from zone to disparate zone under a tight time limit, and it's funny watching the scenery dramatically change within seconds as mountains spring up and the sky changes color. This will either make you feel nostalgic or make you wonder what the hell is going on. In that sense, the game seems sort of quaint next to popular monsters like Burnout, but that's part of this game's appeal. Similarly appealing are the game's various challenges, like trying to impress your date by drifting; you know you're doing well because all these hearts are flying out of your car. In the minus column, the game doesn't feel quite as good as you'd expect considering its pedigree. **Michael Hobbs B**

System: Xbox
Developer: Digital Sumo/AM2
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: October



Fight Club

As rare as it is to get an American-produced 3D fighter, I got two in the same month—Mortal Kombat and this far, far more bare-bones brawler directly inspired by David Fincher's brutal satire, *Fight Club*. And it wouldn't surprise me if some of you dig Fight Club's straight, more realistic style more. The game looks and sounds good, packs a strong punch with its brutal fisticuffs highlighted by an internal view of broken bones, and plays surprisingly well on its foundation of three schools of combat: brawler, martial artist and grappler. Place it next to Japan's best and the game gets pummeled. But if you're open to a passing alternative, step into Fight Club. **Brady Fiechter B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Genuine Games
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October



Midway Arcade Treasures 2

With 20 games spanning the last two decades, Midway Arcade Treasures 2 has something for just about everyone who played games during the '80s and '90s. Everyone will have their favorites (I've been waiting for an arcade-perfect home version of Narc for 15 years), and people will undoubtedly feel some titles hold up better than others, but with a list that includes games like Hard Drivin', Xybots, Mortal Kombat II and 3, Arch Rivals, Cyberball 2072, Total Carnage and more, there's a lot to enjoy here, even if it's just fleeting fun. The interface has been vastly improved over the original Treasures, but unfortunately the bonus interviews suffer from unintelligible audio. At only $20, this compilation is hard to pass up. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Digital Eclipse
Publisher: Midway
Available: October



Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

There are many reasons to dislike Leisure Suit Larry—the vulgar, racist, sexist content, the insanely long load times (which makes no sense considering how small and unimpressive the environments are), the repulsive character design (Larry looks like he's five years old). The main one, however, would have to be that the game is just not fun. While the classic LSL games were clever exploration-based adventures, this update is nothing more than wandering from skanky college girl to skanky college girl, engaging in some of the most insipid, tedious, arbitrary and sometimes unresponsive (not to mention phallic) minigames ever devised. There's hardly a semblance of gameplay here, and the game rarely even offers a laugh. Smut isn't what gaming should be about. **Chris Hoffman F**

System: PlayStation 2 (reviewed), Xbox, PC
Developer: High Voltage
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October



Alien Hominid

With its web roots exposed for all to see, Alien Hominid has leapt from the Internet to console…the first ray of hope that gaming can extend beyond corporate hierarchy. AH is a manic, rock-hard, 2D assault on your motor skills that may lack the polish of the best of this mighty genre, but gets a pass for being the coolest homegrown game ever. Hominid is so fun to look at, it's almost a shame that you barely get to as you assume your role as sentinel for enemy fire that has a tendency to get lost in the pageant of animation and color. To fully reap AH's many rewards, you're looking at some serious do-over action, as even the slightest lapse in focus equals death, but if you're hungering for a dose of 2D, it's worth every smashed controller. Gulp a sixer of Red Bull, tape your eyes open and go for it. **Dave Halverson B**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: The Behemoth
Publisher: D-3 Entertainment
Available: October



King Arthur

From the co-op hack 'n' slash gameplay to the multiple playable characters to the between-level stat-building to the movie footage that fades directly into the controllable action, King Arthur seems to pull all of its tricks directly from EA's Lord of the Rings titles—certainly not a bad thing. King Arthur even has one feature that I felt was missing from the LOTR games, that being a manual lock-on; I just wish it were more responsive when I wanted to change targets. That aside, on-the-fly switching between ranged and melee combat gives the solid action more depth than you'd expect, and the characters and stages look excellent, complete with nice environmental effects. Too bad the movie doesn't provide a more compelling universe. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2 (reviewed), Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Krome Studios
Publisher: Konami
Available: November



Karaoke Revolution Vol. 3

Konami keeps pumping out new editions of Karaoke Revolution with reckless abandon, but given that the technology is rock-solid and that, as far as music/party games go, this series is one of the best, it's hard to complain. In fact, with a more balanced song list drawn from the past several decades, I found Karaoke Revolution Vol. 3 to be far more enjoyable than Vol. 2; from Michael Jackson to Britney Spears to Evanescence, it's all here. The two-mic duet mode is a nifty addition, although I don't see myself enduring THAT much humiliation often, and I'm still bummed that the single-player arcade mode from the original hasn't returned, but what's here is good fun—particularly when sobriety is lacking. **Chris Hoffman B+**

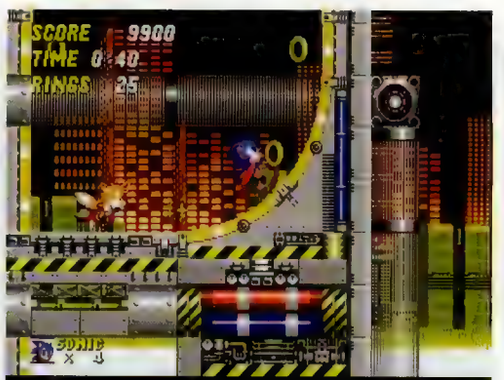
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Konami
Available: November



Conflict: Vietnam

Conflict: Vietnam strikes the same annoying chord as pretty much every squad-based shooter out there: your team makes way too many bonehead moves, and half the time the required tasks would be handled so much more efficiently if you weren't tethered to the artificial design constraints. Which doesn't mean this dramatically improved sequel doesn't have its moments. Occasional firefights get the pulse pounding and create a palpable jungle tension; if only the targeting system weren't so imprecise and the enemies weren't so overly hidden and prone to outmoded respawn, the fine level design and entertaining scenarios could have commanded much stronger impact. Mostly, the game loses its good ideas to overall imprecision. **BF C+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Pivotal Games
Publisher: Global Star Software
Available: October



Sonic Mega Collection Plus

Sonic Mega Collection Plus is an extremely hard game for me to review. On the one hand, we have some of the finest 16-bit games ever devised. On the other hand, these are the same classic games we've re-experienced so many times before—in Sonic Jam on Saturn and in Sonic Mega Collection on GameCube. When Sega first announced this compilation, Sonic CD and Sonic the Fighters were said to be included, but sadly, this is not the case, altering the collection from must-have to me-too status. If you don't already have these excellent games, then Mega Collection Plus is an awesome investment. Otherwise, the new content (Comix Zone and the Game Gear games previously found in Sonic Adventure DX) isn't worth it. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: November



Monster Hunter

Monster Hunter is a fairly good online effort from Capcom Production Studio 1. Based around the primal appeal of hunting down dinosaurs and scavenging their carcasses and the surroundings for spoils, teams of four can play together online completing the game's various quests. However, missteps along the way keep the game from greatness. Though lush, the outdoor environments are quite small and you are constantly running into new areas which require a momentum-sapping load screen. And in a more personal beef, the game just has this awful, clunky, ugly interface that had me dreaming of the elegance of Phantasy Star Online. But even so, there is a level of addiction to be had here as there is in any decent online game. **MH B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 1
Publisher: Capcom
Available: September



Fatal Frame II: Director's Cut

That "Director's Cut" in the title? Basically new costumes awarded upon completion; whatever—if it's your thing, here you go. New lighting routines aren't done well enough to diminish the value of the hauntingly beautiful PS2 version, and a first-person mode ups the claustrophobia, but I found it to amplify the sense of a paralyzing pacing (playing in the third-person is still an option). For any fan of survival horror who missed this unsettling ghost story of twin sisters disturbingly caught in All God's Village—an oppressively dark, elegantly crafted town of isolation—it's time to slink into the best of its kind this year. The feeling of being cornered, your only weapon an ancient camera that disembodies the spirit of the ghost, is unmatched. **BF B+**

System: Xbox
Developer: Tecmo
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: October



Time Crisis: Crisis Zone

I'll bet Namco sells the same number of Time Crisis games every time out. Like the classic 2D shooter, here is a genre that hasn't gone through a revolution in a decade, yet seems to have some kind of built-in audience. For good reason too, I say, as these games are just fun. Short, but fun. The idea behind this Crisis Zone is that you wield a machine gun. As such, the game is designed to let you enjoy spraying bullets everywhere. There are a huge amount of interactive objects in the environments, and you will enjoy blasting the crap out of everything in between or during spraying the enemy with bullets. In other respects, this is a typically solid effort from Namco in this classic genre. **Michael Hobbs B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: October

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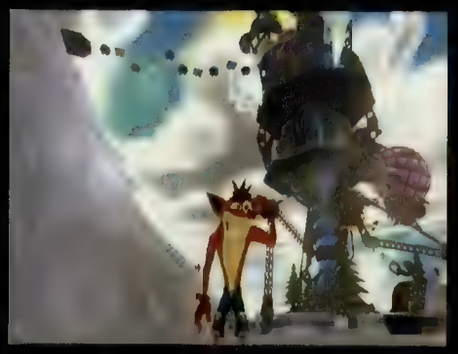
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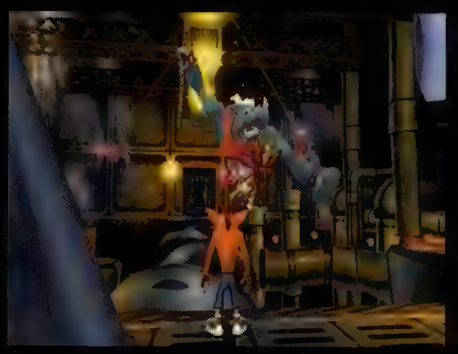
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Crash Twinsanity

Meet the Bandicoot troop





If you're looking for a pure platformer, there are surprisingly few choices out there, especially given the deluge of Q4 games. Malice is too easy, not to mention hard to find, Jak and Daxter have now completely transcended genres, Sly is a "world" game, Tak 2 is platforming impaired, and Tork (which could be the mother of all modern platformers) isn't due until January. If not for Twinsanity, we'd have to set up blocks in the yard and load up on Jägermeister. But fear not. The crack division at Traveller's Tales assigned the task of keeping Uni's resident bandicoot all warm and fuzzy has done a bang-up job merging the best bits of Bandicoots gone by with a wealth of new components, arriving at one of the best platforming sequels since developers received the memo on turning anything with legs and wheels into GTA. Since it's my duty to stoke the fire, I tracked down the folks responsible for a little one-on-one. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Publisher: VU Games
Available: September

"At the core of the Crash franchise is the relationship between Crash and Cortex, and this became the foundation of Twinsanity..."
-Paul Gardner, lead designer

play: I get the sense playing Twinsanity that you guys set out to make Crash your own rather than furthering ND's rendition...
Paul Gardner: It would be hard to put so much care into a game and not feel as if it's your own. At the same time, I think one of the mistakes a new team can make when working on a sequel is to throw out everything that made the original so successful. We're all fans of the original Naughty Dog games and we aimed to use them as our source material. Although we introduce many new characters and gameplay elements, we don't stray from the sensibilities of the Crash universe; it's rich enough that we don't need to make reference to movies or other games. We're just expanding on, adding detail to and drawing humor from the Crash universe.

How did the idea of teaming him with Cortex come about?
Cortex has always been threatening to steal the show. He's such a strong character, much of which has come from the vocal performance of Clancy Brown. From reading the Crash fan forums, he's obviously a well-loved villain. In a way, it's always been inevitable that Cortex would become a playable character and, given their history, we knew teaming him up with Crash would be a good source of humor. It was then a matter of figuring out what kind of situation could possibly drive these two enemies to work together.

Yeah, that CB is like an encyclopedia of cool video game characters. The other piece of the audio puzzle—Crash's cliché jungle soundtrack—has always been its Achilles' heel. In its place, you've orchestrated a zany cartoon soundtrack (one of the best ever, I might add) that really brings out the finer aspects of Crash as a dimwitted but extremely nimble and resourceful creature—a fact you've also painted all over his newly contorting face. Which came first: the funny faces or the madcap tunes to match...or was this just one big, concerted effort to make Crash cooler?
The soundtrack was created by an a cappella group called Spiralmouth. The game was well into production when they began scoring the music, and so Spiralmouth were able to draw on the character animation and dialogue for inspiration. We were lucky to find a collaborator who understood the direction that we were going in and created a soundtrack that complements the tone of the game.

Have you considered giving Crash a fuzzy look? Is the reason you don't do so to free up space to run massive environs at 60fps with streaming levels that don't load? Or is it a PS2 limitations thing?
The decision not to create a fur effect for Crash was taken very early on in the project. The art team wanted to create a consistent and strong cartoon-like visual style that acknowledged the original ND games whilst making full use of the rendering power of the consoles to create rich, complex and immersive environments. Plus, cycles are taken up rendering the things you don't see, Crash's brain and intestines, the camera crew and Cortex's Winnebago.

Heh, you're funny. Twinsanity also brings back Crash as a challenging platformer—the key element that put him in the spotlight in the first place. Levels like Road to Nowhere were sorely missed in ND's follow-ups. By taking that aspect of the brand and building on it, would you call this a rebirth of sorts?
Our intention has always been to strip everything back and rediscover what it was that originally made Crash such a strong character. At the core of the Crash franchise is the relationship between Crash and Cortex, and this became the foundation of Twinsanity, on which game mechanics, storyline and humor were built. In that sense, I suppose you could call it a rebirth, kind of.

Speaking of which, the Ant Agony level is the best pure platforming I've done in many, many years. Was there any hesitation on your part to create a real video game level in today's cushy market?
We were confident that there are enough new mechanics and character interactions in the rest of the game to finish with a pure platforming level. After all, Twinsanity is a Crash Bandicoot game, and this is what made Crash famous. We also wanted to reward the Crash fans who are dedicated enough to reach the end of the game with a classic Crash level.

I also dug Nina Cortex; in fact, she could easily support an entire game. Did you consider giving her more than just the one level? (It was a great ride by the way—absolutely great.)
We hoped Nina would be well-liked, but we didn't expect her to prove so popular. She's becoming the fan forums' sweetheart, although the buck teeth are making the American fans uneasy. Obviously we would have liked to use Ms. Cortex more, but we had to strike a balance between the wide variety of new characters and game mechanics that Twinsanity introduces.

You make an in-joke at one point in the game about an additional area you didn't have time for...and, if anything, even with replayabilty as high as this, I really wanted another world. Was the original plan for a bigger game?
We always have impossible ambitions for every game, but at some point those ambitions have to be balanced against production time. The joke was written very early on in production, since we knew from experience that not everything we planned would appear in the final game and we wanted Cortex to at least acknowledge that.

What are you guys playing right now? What do you like out there?
In the studio we tend to play games that you can fit into a coffee or lunch break. In here we're playing Burnout 3 and Halo multiplayer. The artists are playing old-school 16-bit games and Onimusha 3.

You guys have been making platformers since forever. How have you had to evolve as a company to conform to the current state of gaming as the user base has widened?
Traveller's Tales as a company has been developing games for almost 14 years now. However, Traveller's Tales Oxford was created three years ago with the specific brief to reinvigorate the Crash franchise. In doing so, the Oxford team has grown from seven to almost 30, harnessing skills from outside of the games industry—concept artists, animators and scriptwriters whose background is in film and television—to support our veteran game development team in creating a compelling experience.

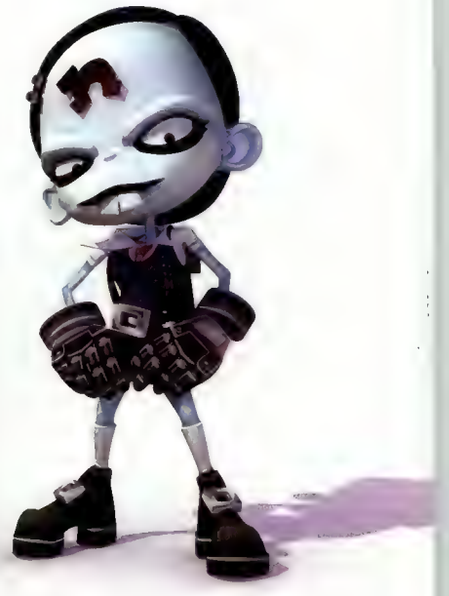
Wow. Is there a specific motto at TT?
"That's impossible, how do we do it!" **play**







Takes you back, doesn't it?





Auto Assault

Post-apocalyptic car combat gets a massive tune-up Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows 2000/XP	Video: Dx9, pixel shader
Processor: 2 GHz+ CPU	Sound: Dx compatible
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

It's not hard to imagine a future where almost every genre has at least one massively multiplayer game. For now, traditional RPGs usually dominate the scene due to tried and tested formulas. NetDevil and NCsoft will be breaking the rules in early 2005 with Auto Assault, when they introduce massively multiplayer vehicular combat wrapped up in deep RPG gameplay. Featuring an intense soundtrack by Richard Dekkard, known for his work with Peter Gabriel and Seal, and incredible cutscenes from the ultra-talented Japanese CG studio Digital Frontier (Maximo, *Appleseed*), Auto Assault's goal is to offer the potential online player a brand of attractive, fast-paced action never before seen in the genre. We fired some questions in the direction of project lead Scott Brown at NCsoft's Austin HQ before he peeled away to the local game conference. .

Mike Griffin

Developer: NetDevil
Publisher: NCsoft
Available: March 2005





Interview

Scott Brown, project lead, NetDevil

play: Are there any particular sources that fueled Auto Assault's futuristic designs?
Scott Brown: The game was designed in the spirit of Richard Garriot's Autoduel, and a lot of other games like it from the past, and certainly post-apocalyptic movies like *Mad Max*. We also have some of the flavor of alien technology and deeper sci-fi influences, so it's not as low-tech.

Your story adds a unique twist to the usual post-apocalyptic scenario...
Definitely. The idea is that a powerful alien virus infected Earth, and we ended up using all of the weapons at our disposal, basically destroying most of the world, in order to kill off the virus. The game takes place approximately 200 years after these events.

What are the playable factions and their motivations?
Three primary groups have survived the apocalypse. The first and most high tech, overall, is the Human faction. They released all this weaponry and buried themselves underground. They're just now returning to the surface, and their goal is to take back the planet. Next we have the Mutants. They sort of see themselves as "the divine chosen," because they lived through the virus above ground. The third group is the Biomeks. These are the soldiers that were left behind when the humans went underground after the strike. To survive, they embraced bionics and robotics, and they adapted themselves that way. Their vehicles can even transform into mechs and walk around.

Each side controls a distinct territory. Will players of opposing factions attempt to seize land from the enemy?
According to the lay of the map, there are three different regions, each filled with lots of PvE [player versus environment] content for their respective faction. In the center of the map, we have what we call "The Wasteland." This is a large area of outposts that players can capture and defend against other factions in PvP skirmishes.

> "This is a very different experience for players in the genre, as they actually get to clearly wipe out an entire town, and players in the vicinity will see the destruction."
>
> -Scott Brown, project lead, NetDevil

So NetDevil is wisely addressing the needs of both PvE and PvP players. Which one is receiving the most of content?
We're aiming to develop a much more story-driven game than players are used to. We try to capture that feeling you had when you played other cooperative games, where you were actually playing through a story and seeing it unfold. So PvE is a very large part of our game. The entire design team will continue to work on expansions post-release, so there will always be new story content. On the other hand, PvP is a really important part of our gameplay too. Besides outposts, we also have arena combat, and it's something PvP fans can get into right away. Our goal is to offer one of the best ranking systems ever. You can challenge players individually or in large teams in the arenas, and we'll have daily events with a complete ladder system. We might have amateur nights for lower levels, or a weight limit title fight. These might feature a handful of huge semis and tanks squaring off, or maybe tons of little motorbikes and dune buggies going at it. You and your crew decide.

How are you approaching the item and loot system in Auto Assault?
Most general items in our game, even the vehicles, are produced through a "loot generator." Every time an item enters the world, the stats are different. So for the player that enjoys item hunting and collecting, there's really never an end to the search. This system is all about being able to make choices that suit your gameplay needs: do I want the machine gun with an accuracy bonus, or the one with explosive rounds? Make the call. We also have a whole system of customization, like new paint jobs and all kinds of accessories to really give a vehicle the look you're going for.

Auto Assault will incorporate both persistent space and instanced maps. How will the mission system take advantage of both options to present a story?
I'll give you a brief example of a mission. This one has a four-part story arc, and it initially takes place on one of the major highways where all players will typically intermingle. You come to a point in the story where you discover that a nearby dam is delivering power to the enemy faction that you're fighting, and you'll be sent off to a private instanced map where you have to destroy the dam. So you'll form up a group—which we call a "Convoy" in AA—and proceed to tackle this instanced portion, ultimately capping off with the dam being blown apart and flooding the area.



Here in my car, I feel safest of all, I can lock all my doors, it's the only way to live...





While advancing through the course of the mission system, will players' actions have any lasting impact on the world?
We've had a lot of people tell us that they want their presence to have some effect on the game world. To help give players a sense of that, we save the state of missions and story arcs as you proceed. You might return to that same dam-busting map later on, and there could be a race that takes place around the new lake that has formed. It has actually retained the new state of this destroyed dam and flooded region that you altered in an earlier mission.

What are some of the general tasks a player can partake in, out in the wilds?
You'll have items to collect, deliveries to make, specific objects to locate and straightforward kill tasks, but unlike most games, each activity offers a hand-made story-driven experience. Also remember: our game is very much about destructible objects and environments, and your vehicles are extremely powerful. A task might have you laying waste to an outlaw camp. This means destroying the buildings, blowing up all their vehicles and infantry and basically mowing down everything in sight. This is a very different experience for players in the genre, as they actually get to clearly wipe out an entire town, and players in the vicinity will see the destruction.

Considering Auto Assault is an early 2005 title, it will no doubt benefit from plenty of eye candy. What kind of cool stuff are you doing?
We're working with NCsoft's core technology team to develop this engine, so the sky's the limit. With our art style, it is very much a heavily shader-based game. We have things like self-shadowing, bump and specular per-pixel mapping, this great water shader and awesome heat distortion post-effects for fire. Our focus is definitely on what we can do to fully exploit today's hardware.

You're supporting the gameplay with a Havok physics backbone, which we don't often see used in MMPs. How will Auto Assault take advantage?
Beyond the huge explosions and flying debris, physics are actually very helpful for us online. Consider a typical first-person game, let's say, where you can sidestep...cars can't do that. So we apply the physics to predict where your vehicle will be, calculating weight and momentum while you're driving, skidding, jumping and any similar actions that directly affect gameplay. Ultimately, we get a lot of bandwidth gains by having the physics take care of these things.

Although currently unrated, NetDevil assures us that Auto Assault will not be a game for kids. With NCsoft's help, they are dedicated to making mature, exciting episodic content for Auto Assault in the weeks, months, and years following its release. As longtime vehicular combat fans and rabid online players, we'll certainly be taking a spin in their alternate reality.

Tribes: Vengeance

This worthy successor runs a winning campaign Review

Recommended system specs

OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB, Dx9.0c, pixel shader
CPU: 2.5GHz+	Sound: Dx compatible
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

With Tribes: Vengeance, Dynamix passes the torch along to Irrational after a storied history of more than 10 games set in the Tribes universe, released under various monikers. From Metaltech's robotic fine-tuning to Starsiege Tribes' first big dip into large-scale multiplayer combat, the series has been ongoing for over a decade. Predictably, Tribes: Vengeance plows headlong into 32-player online TribalWar combat, but for the first time in the series, this Tribes includes a full single-player campaign.

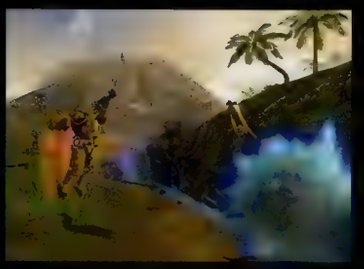
When a multiplayer-focused first-person shooter commits to offering a single-player campaign mode, the results, however polished, often feel contrived. As a case in point, we have Unreal Tournament 2004's single-player game. While it looks and plays great and has plenty of different scenarios, there's this presiding sense that you're just playing a glorified AI bot match. Initially, one receives this same type of feeling from the Tribes: Vengeance campaign. Much like UT 2004, the single-player game operates as one huge training mission, dropping tips about aspects of gameplay as you take on different types of levels, with the ultimate goal of improving your skills for multiplayer action. As the game proceeds, however, the credibility of TV's story and the devices used to tell that story evolve rather well. The plotline approaches themes of honor, love, betrayal and revenge, and while it's far from cutting-edge cerebral sci-fi, the script is pretty good and the voice acting is consistently higher-caliber stuff. The most powerful twist in the real-time narrative involves the travel from past to present and person to person, explaining histories and relationships through the eyes of various characters that are interconnected across different timelines. Not only does this technique enrich the depth of the story and create a basis for every character's motivations, you also experience a good deal of gameplay variety with each playable character in the past and present—including some characters you just wouldn't expect to be controllable.

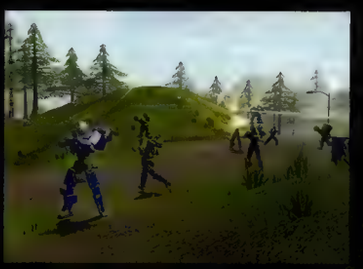
The level structure across TV's single-player campaign shows signs of the aforementioned "training for multiplayer" feel, with team elements like base control pulled directly from the TribalWar modes. Thankfully, the levels usually take place in huge indoor and outdoor environments loaded with well-defined objectives. These levels follow the history of conflict between the Tribal and Empire sides across a 20-year period. One present-day encounter has you in the light armor suit of Princess Julia as she dominates the coliseum games in an arena-based team spectacle, while in a past mission later on, you'll be in control of the frightened child version of Julia in a flashback sequence as she flees from a Tribal strike in the heart of imperial space. For a little tike, Julia is pretty handy with a grappling hook. You won't always be role-playing a main character from the tribesman or imperial factions, however. In the midst of the conflict across both eras, a powerful cybernetic assassin named Mercury prowls the territory of both factions, seeking targets and information for a mysterious benefactor. The missions of these secondary characters are among the best in Tribes: Vengeance, with some of the most elaborate level design and intense fights.

Regardless of the level, Tribes: Vengeance plays extremely well and has a simple, yet robust equipment loadout system. The control of the various ground and air vehicles is intuitive—a cross between Halo and UT 2004—and the finesse involved with moving around in the main combat suit is consistently satisfying. You can gear-up in a light, medium or heavy suit, and mobility, durability and weapon power will guide your choice. Using your anti-gravity packs to jet around the level, the feeling of momentum and lift is almost perfect. Also, you can "ski" down angled slopes on built-in frictionless boots; the skill involved is wickedly fun, and when executed correctly, you will maintain all of your aerial speed when transitioning between a rapid sky decent and a swooshing hillside boot-ski on a cushion of air. As you might imagine, finding a fast jet-and-ski path in a capture-the-flag match can be most effective.

The weapons function as advertised, based on their specs, though some offer clever twists. The shotgun's cluster blasts, for example, also bounce off surfaces, and







> "The most powerful twist in the real-time narrative involves the travel from past to present and person to person..."



the sniper laser rifle is more accurate the longer it recharges between shots (mere seconds, but an important consideration). The Chaingun also becomes less accurate after sustained firing, as it heats up. You can switch weapons and allow it to cool naturally, or accelerate the cool down process by diving through water or traveling extremely fast. It's these little touches, and a general competence to movement and weapons handling, that make TV's combat a success.

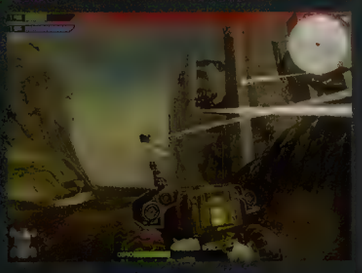
Tribes: Vengeance is built on an enhanced Unreal engine, and while the performance is as one might expect of Epic's engine in this genre—ie, absolutely blazing fast—the improved bump mapping adds a great touch to environments. Irrational's universe employs a lot of bright colors and lighting, and striking horizons, and the distinct visual style thrives on this engine's features. Havok physics toss bodies and flip-flop slain aerial foes, as their still-active jetpacks spiral out of control, a rag-dolling corpse in tow. The entire story is told through real-time cutscenes, and though some attempts at dramatic character movement don't work, these simple cinematics get the job done. As mentioned, the voice acting is quite good and this quality extends into the in-game radio chatter and enemy reactions, while the music—a mix of electronic tunes with drum 'n bass overtones —is well-composed but would benefit from greater variety. The calm, clear announcer in multiplayer matches isn't the usual Mortal Kombat-style über-demon voice, and it actually sounds refreshing alongside the voiceover taunts. Much like its effortlessly solid controls, TV's presentation is a mark of proficiency, powered by a great engine.

While it's unclear at this point if Tribes: Vengeance will catch-on with gamers as a bigtime multiplayer favorite, Irrational has certainly equipped their game with all the right features—buddy lists, profiles, stat ranking, voting, voice com—for a long online life, and their server system and network code are robust. And for the first time, you can pick-up a Tribes game and enjoy a pretty damn good single-player experience (the multi-character era hopping *makes* it), with no intention of transitioning into online team play afterwards. By skipping that final step, however, you'd be selling yourself very short. **Mike Griffin** B+

Developer: Irrational Games
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October







The toddler Princess Juiia straps into a Fighter Pod as Tribals invade the imperial palace.

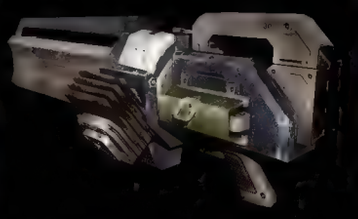
The Weapons of Tribes: Vengeance

Spinfusor Disc Launcher



Range: Long
Speed: Slow
Damage: High
Special: Disc jump

Chaingun



Range: High
Speed: Fast
Damage: Low
Special: Overheats

Blaster Shotgun



Range: Short
Speed: Fast
Damage: Medium
Special: Wall ricochets

Grenade Launcher



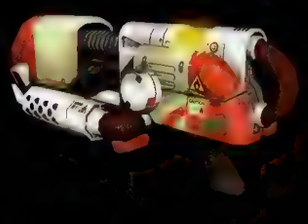
Range: Medium
Speed: Medium
Damage: High
Special: Bouncing grenades

Grappler



Range: Medium
Speed: Slow
Damage: None
Special: Winch

Burner



Range: Medium
Speed: Medium
Damage: Medium
Special: Mid-air fireball

Rocket Pod Launcher



Range: Medium
Speed: Slow
Damage: High to Extreme
Special: Guided

Sniper Rifle



Range: Long
Speed: Fast
Damage: Extreme
Special: Energy-based

Star Wars: Battlefront

Strong team play saves the galaxy — Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB; pixel/vertex shader
Processor: P4 2.0 GHz CPU	Sound: Direct X 9.0c compatible
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband





Pandemic Studios is well known for their team-based shooters, such as Full Spectrum Warrior and forthcoming Mercenaries, and it's that same coordinated team ideology that inspired LucasArts to enlist their expertise in the construction of another *Star Wars* action title. Following last year's successful Clone Wars, Pandemic unloads with Star Wars Battlefront, a full-blown Battlefield 1942-style team-based shooter. Masterfully launched in conjunction with the DVD release of the classic *Star Wars* Trilogy films, SWB has its own voracious fan base relishing in the re-creation of epic battles from the entire series, old and new.

Star Wars Battlefront opens with a strong presentation, as we're treated to a stylish video menu background courtesy of IK Studios (celebrated for their work on many DVD film menus). We're cued into the Star Wars universe by the resonating John Williams score, and the ingredients of franchise immersion begin to take shape. SWB makes a valiant attempt at providing a lengthy campaign game through its main single-player modes, but only the Galactic Conquest mode provides any real depth, as each conquered planet imparts slight bonuses to your troops. The Clone Wars and Galactic Civil War campaigns allow you to take control of one of 20 troop types from the Rebel, Empire, Clone or Droid factions, for a heavy dose of AI squad combat on major historical battlefields. The strength of these settings lies in the solid presentation of each film-based environment. The huge rain-soaked cloning facility on Kamino looks excellent, and the City of Theed really goes beyond the usual movie-game simulacra—nailing the color scheme and layout of the sets and CG dead on. This is impressive stuff, especially given the amount of characters, vehicles and effects that the engine is shuffling around at very agreeable frame rates. Full marks to the great battle sounds—among the best of any *Star Wars* action title to date.

> "This is impressive stuff, especially given the amount of characters, vehicles and effects that the engine is shuffling around..."



For all of its fine film re-creation, including a nice rendition of the ever-present *Star Wars* game Hoth level, Battlefront doesn't consistently deliver quality level design. A typical level involves taking over command points across the map, and sometimes blowing up specific targets. The path between these command points, and the layout of every obstacle in between, can easily make or break the flow of SWB's squad-based gameplay. The Yavin 4 map, for example, with its Aztec-style ruins and strong central command points, suits the gameplay perfectly. On the other hand, maps like Cloud City have overly restrictive "choke points" that often transform battles into fairly uninspired seesaw sessions. The quantity of great maps far outweighs the few that are merely average, and quite often the presence of fun vehicles, like Starfighters and AT-STs, will significantly offset a level's shortcomings.

It's not breaking any new ground, but Star Wars Battlefront is definitely worth picking up for the great online team play, and with multiplayer as the primary impetus for the game's existence, this is certainly a good area for the game to shine in. If SWB has one unequivocally feeble area, it's the clumsy, minimalist server interface. Patch this, please, LucasArts—or give us much better server options in the next Battlefront.

Mike Griffin

Developer: Pandemic Studios
Publisher: Lucasarts
Available: September

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War World—Tactical Combat

Frenetic mech action with console pedigree | Preview

Recommended system specs

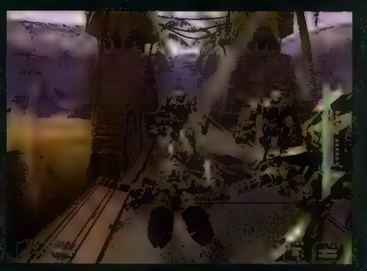
OS: Win 2K/Xp	Video: GeForce 4 Ti
CPU: 1.6GHz+	Sound: Dx 8.1 compatible
Memory: 128 MB	Internet: Broadband

Ever wonder what happened to some of Rare's best artists, the guys responsible for system-defying graphics in games like Banjo-Kazooie and Star Fox Adventures? Yeah, so did we. Play tracked down Morten Brodersen and Johnni Christensen, now partnered with former Nintendo exec Phillip Tavel, at their new studio, Third Wave Games. Their latest project is War World—Tactical Combat, a fast-paced PC mech shooter.
Mike Griffin

Developer: Third Wave Games
Publisher: Third Wave Games
Available: November 2005







Interview

Morten Brodersen, lead programmer // Johnni Christensen, lead artist // Phillip Tavel, creative director

play: We're all old-school Rare fans. Tell us a little about your console background.
Brodersen: The first big game I did was Banjo-Kazooie on the N64. I was given one of only two N64 circuit boards available at Rare at the time, a small pile of manuals, and told to "make it work." It was extremely successful, and the amazing thing is that nobody on the team had done a 3D game before.
Christensen: One game I worked on was Star Fox Adventures, where I served as the lead character artist. My main responsibilities were creating the characters and overseeing the entire art department. While working on SFA, I also worked with the DK64 team creating characters for that game as well.
Tavel: While I was at Nintendo, I worked on DK64 and Jet Force Gemini from a production, marketing and localization point of view. Rare was the best of all the developers I got to work with while I was at Nintendo.

How has your console work lent itself to the creation of War World?
Brodersen: If you have only developed for the PC, you often end up learning a lot of bad habits including simply increasing the minimum spec when the game runs too slow. On console, you learn to do things in a more streamlined fashion, using less memory, fewer CPU cycles, etc. Because of this experience, we treat the PC like a console. We are making sure that the game looks good and runs fast on our minimum spec no matter what.
Christensen: I have always loved robots and mechs, and making War World has finally given me a chance to put my spin on the classic mech genre. I have done mostly work with furry characters, so it is fun to get to do some kick-ass robots with big guns.

What types of graphical effects have you incorporated into WW's engine, and how scaleable is the game for low-end users?
Brodersen: The key effects we use are per-pixel specular lighting (a la Half-Life 2), with light mapping and shadow volumes (see Doom 3) for dynamic shadows on the mechs. Because of the previously mentioned minimum spec, the game will look great and run at 60fps from a GeForce3 and up.

What sort of single-player aspect will War World have?
Tavel: There are two main single-player game modes in War World: the Mission game and the Customizable game. The Mission game is going to follow a very cool 12-mission story arc within the fictional environment of War World. The Customizable game is a quick way for you to jump in and create your own tailor-made mayhem by modifying all of the different game parameters.

What kind of action will we see in War World online?
Tavel: This is not your daddy's Quake. You can have four different weapons equipped and active simultaneously. Not just four weapons to switch between, but four weapons ready to be fired at any point in time, plus a thruster to get away fast and a shield for defensive action—this is where playing on a PC with a keyboard really comes in handy. You can find yourself launching land mines in one direction while spraying a hail of bullets from your mini-gun in another direction while shooting heat-seeking missiles in a third direction and narrowly avoiding a mortar grenade exploding nearby. And pretty much anything that we can possibly make customizable, we will.

> "I have done mostly work with furry characters, so it is fun to get to do some kick-ass robots with big guns."
>
> -Johnni Christensen lead artist on War World—Tactical Combat

Third Wave is committed to providing downloadable expansion packs every couple of months. What sort of content will you be adding?
Tavel: This will be decided by the people who play the game. The War World website will have a forum where players can request and vote on what should be added to War World. Some of the first additions might be a skin editor, additional mechs, more weapon types and possibly a weapons research mode.

Finally, there's that great price point of $19.95. Is it difficult to convince players there is both quality and value at that price range?
Tavel: Essentially, War World delivers at $19.95 what a lot of people have paid as much as $49.95 for at a game store. As for convincing players about the quality, that's where the Warworld.net web site comes in. You'll be able to download a demo and try it out for yourself.

After playing through an early version of WW-TC, we were immediately struck by how tight the controls felt—console-like, as advertised. The engine is silky-smooth, and there's a really accomplished style to the mech animations. We anxiously await the final result.

Call of Duty: United Offensive

Worthy sequel adds improved multiplayer game — Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win XP/2K	Video: 64 MB, Dx 9.0c compatible
CPU: 2GHz+	Sound: Dx9.0c compatible
Memory: 256 MB	Internet: Broadband

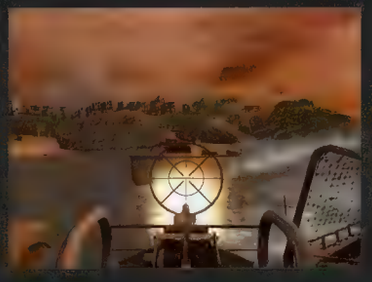
Infinity Ward crafted a wickedly fun WW2 shooter with the original Call of Duty. Between the superb pacing and direction, and the various scripted action sequences, CoD's campaign ruled last year's crop of military shooters. Taking the wheel for the expansion pack, Gray Matter Studios comes very close to producing a superior result in United Offensive. You'll immediately notice the engine being pushed much further than the original, generating improved smoke, weather and explosion particle effects, and more all-around complexity. And where the first game placed a pretty important emphasis on tight squad movement and rural crawls, some of the massive wide-open battles in United Offensive—most notably in the American and Soviet stretches of the campaign—go completely overboard on sheer numbers and epic, large-scale action. For all of its excellent production values, the single-player mode is actually a bit short. This is where UO's fine multiplayer game comes in. Gray Matter has provided tons of huge maps and fun vehicles like tanks and jeeps, and their twist on various established modes like domination and base assault work *very* well in these environments.

Mike Griffin B+

Developer: Gray Matter Studios
Publisher: Activision
Available: September



Above: Give 'em hell from the gunner position aboard a British B-17.







Alpha Black Zero

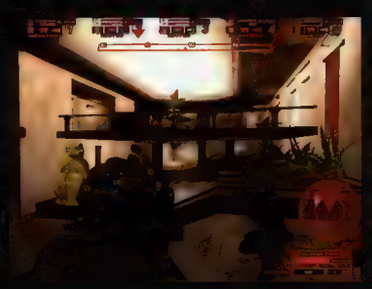
This squad shooter misses the mark — Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win XP/2K	Video: 128 MB, T&L
CPU: 2.5GHz+	Sound: Dx9.0 compatible
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

Alpha Black Zero makes a really earnest attempt at creating a compelling squad-based shooter environment. There is a ton of voiceover (too much, perhaps) and a really convoluted story with admirable depth. If only a similar attention to detail was applied to the gameplay. Many control fundamentals are flawed, frequently plagued by miscues such as clumsy and inconsistent aiming and reloading, and a generally sluggish feel to basic movement. The fact that the characters glide over the environment in an awkward, off-speed fashion certainly doesn't help to erase the discrepancies of movement. However, none of these offenses are particularly deal-breaking per se; it's the poor AI that sends Alpha Black Zero plummeting off the deep end. Your squad mates often get stuck, fall off cliffs or refuse to fire. You'll witness similar AI shutdown in the enemies. It's especially bizarre when a teammate and enemy stare at each other at arm's length, twitching slightly and not firing. Playing cooperatively with human teammates is like a revelation, though it does not miraculously compensate for other shortcomings. There's a lot of content here, and the old Serious Sam engine still looks pretty impressive in outdoor locations, but far too many key elements are poorly executed.

Mike Griffin C-

Developer: Khaeon
Publisher: Playlogic/Tri Synergy
Available: September



Evil Genius

Great villainous nuances mask minor issues — Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win XP/2K	Video: GeForce 3, 64 MB
CPU: P4 1.5GHz+	Sound: Dx9.0b compatible
Memory: 256 MB	Internet: Broadband

Evil Genius is an RTS game with plenty of wit and style, and, as such, it's bound to win over many players who typically stay clear of the genre. The slick '60s spy theme, old-school *James Bond* with a hint of *Austin Powers* mischief, is decorated in appropriately floral colors and stylish silhouettes, scored by a fantastically kitschy, sometimes epic, Bacharach-esque soundtrack. As master criminal Maximilian, Shen Yu or Alexis, with the help of many cliché henchmen, you build up your secret lair and develop a legion of minions. The micromanagement portion of lair maintenance and minion development is intuitive and entertaining, and you'll witness comical scenes of secret device usage and training sessions. The accompanying animations and Sims-style mumble speak are often hilarious—like hearing your men whoop and holler as they take down a pesky agent. Controlling your minions can be a bit of a chore, however, as they automatically perform certain actions, regardless of specialty. Unfortunately, the game loses a bit of its focus after the first handful of mission objectives, and you'll replay similar base defense stalemates far too often as your loot-fetching teams bring the heat from authorities. Evil Genius nonetheless succeeds on many levels.

Mike Griffin B

Developer: Elixir Studios
Publisher: VU Games
Available: September



Postscript

Dark and Light steps out of the shadows

Interview
Stephane Quilichini, NP Cube

Lead designer Stephane Quilichini of NP Cube gives **play** readers the latest details on Dark and Light's continuing development.

play: Dark and Light news was rather subdued this summer, while MMORPG big shots World of Warcraft and EverQuest II rolled full steam ahead with Betas and release plans. Are you feeling any pressure from these upcoming games?
Stephane Quilichini: DnL is on schedule for the second quarter of 2005. One can assume that EQ2 and WoW will bring new gamers to the MMO world this year, and we see this as an advantage. DnL will attract new gamers not only with our high level of quality, but also with a new approach to gameplay in the genre, with our "Exploration" system. Details will be available in coming months…

What sort of major developments can we expect in the next phase of Dark and Light Beta this fall?
All combat mechanisms should be finished, along with a good part of the skill system. Crafting and transportation systems will also launch, and we will be left with finalizing the economic and political systems.

NP Cube recently appointed Alchemic Dream as DnL's major support and content provider. What service will they provide?
The AD choice was made after two years of common thinking and communication about MMOs, and they have strong experience within the genre. We were looking for people we could depend on to be totally involved with DnL development and manage community activities. Aurelien Merville (AD's general manager) answered our queries about these details with all the right answers, and also gave us some solutions for the localization of our web site in different languages and for in-game services. Aurelien also used our unique world to catch the attention of Gary Gygax (the founder of Dungeons & Dragons), who will be helping to create new quests and stories. So you can see the positive implications of having the AD team on board.

As you approach the later stages of development, what are some of the major hurdles you've left to surmount?
At this development stage, we have no major technical problems to fix before launch. We do have a tight schedule between now and the launch, as lots of new technologies were integrated into DnL on the server side, such as Microforté's Bigworld. We will be the first game to utilize this technology on such an enormous scale. It should be "magic" to see more than 100,000 monsters and over 50,000 gamers running together simultaneously on our servers in one unique world.

Thanks Stephane. Once again, our intrigue has been piqued by Dark and Light.
Thanks for your interest. After four years of fine-tuned game development, we are just as excited to introduce DnL to the world as gamers seem to be to play it!





Blizzard announces World of Warcraft: Collector's Edition

Known for their special box set releases of the Diablo and Warcraft series, Blizzard will be offering a huge Collector's Edition package for World of Warcraft. The set includes the full game on CD and DVD and a free one-month subscription, plus a 10-day "Guest Pass" for a friend. The package also includes The Art of World of Warcraft, a 200+ page hardcover art book, the official soundtrack, a behind-the-scenes DVD, high-quality cloth map, signed special edition game manual and an exclusive in-game pet. In typical form, Blizzard is *not* cutting corners on quality.



NPD Top PC Games

Sales figures 9/12/04 to 9/18/04

01	The Sims 2 / EA Games
02	Call of Duty: United Offensive / Activision
03	Madden NFL 2005 / EA Sports
04	EverQuest: Omens of War / Sony Online Ent.
05	Doom 3 / Activision
06	The Sims Deluxe / EA Games
07	Call of Duty / Activision
08	World Poker Championship / ValuSoft
09	Tournament Poker / Eagle Games
10	Rise of Nations / Microsoft

Square Enix developing new PC-only MMORPG

Although details remain scarce, Square Enix is developing a PC-only MMORPG titled Fantasy Earth: The Ring of Dominion. Fantasy Earth will be joining the highly successful PC version of Final Fantasy XI (and later EverQuest II) on Square Enix' popular PlayOnline service. Featuring a world in perpetual conflict akin to Lineage II, Fantasy Earth will chronicle the exploits of five kings vying for control of surrounding kingdoms. The game is also expected to incorporate RTS elements and castle sieges. Could this be the PvP-oriented game that Square Enix fans have been craving?



New City of Heroes update and DVD Collector's Edition

Cryptic Studios and NCsoft enjoyed the successful launch of "Issue 2: A Shadow of the Past," their second free downloadable City of Heroes expansion. Featuring completely new zones suitable for almost any level range, with all-new super villain groups, the expansion also introduces flowing capes for costumes (at the behest of much fan petitioning) and unique special effects for mid-to-high-level characters. As City of Heroes continues to ride a wave of much-deserved acclaim and popularity, November will see the release of the CoH Collector's DVD Edition. This special-issue package will include a 16-page comic book, 32-page mini-reference guide, city maps, a limited edition "Statesman" Heroclix, an exclusive in-game item and the original CoH game with both expansions. This is a good opportunity to check out one of the best MMOs of 2004.

Boktai 2: Solar Boy Django

Review

Solar flair

The first Boktai was an enjoyable game, but Konami has really upped the ante with the sequel. At its core, the game is essentially the same—a puzzle-heavy action-RPG that relies on a solar sensor to create some truly innovative obstacles—meaning you'll want to brave the outdoors to truly appreciate the experience. But where Boktai 2 differs is in the much deeper gameplay. Being able to learn numerous magical spells, master several types of weapons (and even forge new ones) and customize hero Django's stats as he levels up provides a much more complete experience. Likewise, NPCs, which populate the central hub town as you rescue them, play a much bigger role, and the story is much more fleshed out, leading to an excellent gameplay twist that occurs just a few hours into the game. However, with all of the added features, I think maybe Konami went overboard in some cases—specifically with the deteriorating inventory items and a severely stingy continue system (you have to pay to continue, and then you only get half your health back). I'm all for the more challenging gameplay—and it *is* far more challenging than the original—but that's not the way to do it, especially considering the semi-frequent instant deaths. These questionable design choices sap some of the fun out of an otherwise great game. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: October







Choosing the right weapon is paramount in boss fights like this one.

Star Wars Trilogy: Apprentice of the Force

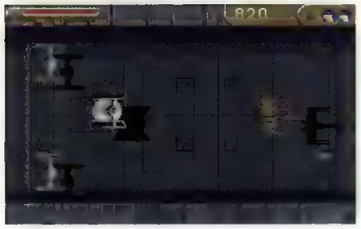
Review

Anyone who remembers the classic Super Star Wars games on the SNES knows more or less what to expect from this game—side-scrolling action and platforming, mixed with a few vehicle stages for variety, all taking a number of liberties with the *Star Wars* plot. However, Star Wars Trilogy: Apprentice of the Force isn't nearly as fun as those games of old, due in part to the fact that Luke is the only playable character, and thus only his scenes in the movies are represented (no battle of Endor, for example), and also due to the bland visuals. Though the gameplay starts out basic, it does pick up halfway through as Luke gains more abilities, yet never ends up being anything more than average. **Chris Hoffman C**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Ubisoft
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: September









F-Zero: GP Legend

Review

One of my most vivid 16-bit memories is of the first time I fired up my Super Famicom and laid eyes on F-Zero...Nintendo sure knows how to keep the fire stoked. The biggest difference between this and other FZs is the toon-based story mode, which adds perspective from both sides of the wheel—apprehending as a member of F-Zero or fleeing as one of the many criminals they hunt down—all of which end up parked in GP mode, your standard FZ triple-cup challenge featuring both classic and new tracks. But a word of caution: either train or race some GP if your F-Zero skills need fine tuning. Wheeler's as squirrelly in the game as he is on TV, and enemies like Samurai Goroh don't go down easy. They took out the throttle warble (bah!) but the Zero's still a hero. **D Halverson B+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: September



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: Battle Nexus

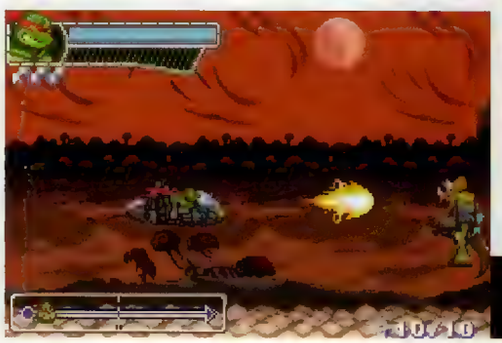
Review

Heroes in a stealth shell

When I think of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, I think of action-packed martial arts mayhem with a cartoon twist. I don't think of stealth, I don't think of puzzles, and I certainly don't think of collect-a-thon gameplay. But strangely enough, that's what we got here, which wouldn't necessarily be bad had it been done right. Instead, we're treated to slow-paced gameplay hindered by arbitrary rules—having to start every stage without your weapon, and being forced to sneak around the level to find it, is a huge contrivance. The ensuing stealth is just not a good fit for TMNT, and is rather silly given the brain-dead enemy AI. The game improves dramatically once you can actually fight, but on the next stage you'll have to go through the motions all over again. And while I applaud the concept of giving each turtle unique moves so you can choose the one best suited for each stage, in practice, you'll have to play through each level once with each character anyway to collect the required crystal shards since you can't switch on the fly—a lousy way to artificially extend the game's life. Vehicle stages offer a welcome break from the rest of the action (no need to hunt for weapons here), and the game looks and sounds good, but TMNT2 disappoints overall. **Chris Hoffman C-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Studios
Publisher: Konami
Available: October







The vehicle stages are pretty cool; too bad the rest of the game doesn't follow suit.

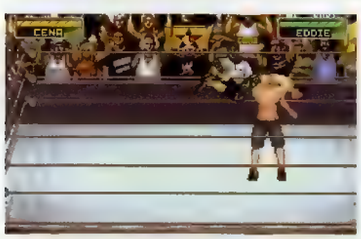
WWE Survivor Series

Review

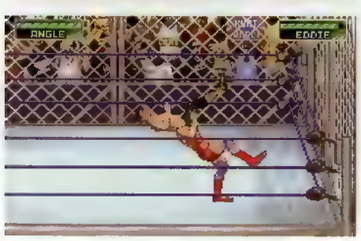
Considering that it's been two years since the last WWE game hit the GBA, it shouldn't be a stretch of the imagination to envision a vastly improved sequel—but that is not the case. WWE Survivor Series is almost an exact clone of the previous game—the modes, the moves, the detailed but somewhat stiff animation, even half the character roster. A dry story mode is the only new addition; strangely, despite the title, Survivor Series bouts aren't included. I don't particularly mind the methodical gameplay, but given the lack of character-specific moves, the bouts grow dull fast. Wrestling games have come a long way in the past decade; it's time for some of those improvements to come to GBA. **Chris Hoffman C**

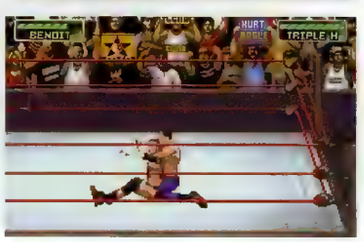
System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Natsume

Publisher: THQ
Available: October









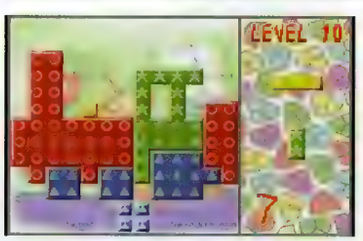
It's Mr. Pants

Review

You might not expect a game with such an intriguing title as It's Mr. Pants to be a puzzle game where you construct perfect squares and rectangles out of an assortment of Tetris-like blocks, but that's exactly what it is (albeit with an amusing underpants theme). It's a bit more exciting than it sounds, but the lengthy main mode, Puzzle Mode, is held back by the fact that you aren't told which predetermined blocks will be arriving, making it a game of guesswork and trial and error rather than pure strategy. The other timed modes (Wipeout, where you must clear the screen of junk blocks, and Marathon) fare better, but they have few options, providing mildly addictive yet limited fun. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Rare

Publisher: THQ
Available: November







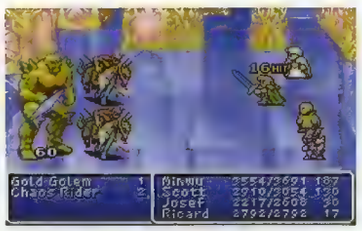
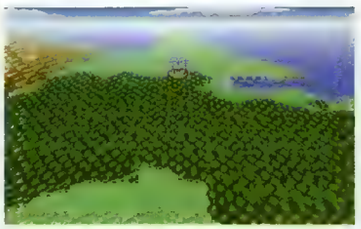
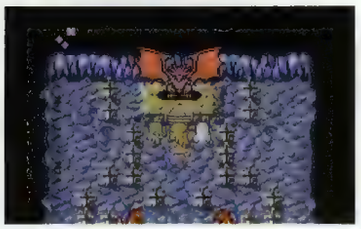


Final Fantasy I & II: Dawn of Souls

Preview

Enhanced, rebalanced and packed with extra gameplay, the first two Final Fantasy games—originally seen on NES/Famicom, most recently remade on PlayStation—are headed to GBA in the form of Final Fantasy I & II: Dawn of Souls. Aside from the updated graphics and gameplay tweaks (magic now consumes MP in FF1, for example), both games are receiving optional new areas. Four new Dungeons of Chaos are available in FF1, packed with new items and enemies drawn from later FF titles (Sephiroth rumored to be among them), while in FF2, a new dungeon, called the Soul of Rebirth, becomes available after you beat the game. Soul of Rebirth provides an additional 20 hours of gameplay in a story parallel to the main quest. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November


Banjo Pilot

Preview

It's been years since it was first announced as a Diddy Kong game, but at long last, Banjo Pilot is finally preparing for lift-off. Choose your pilot from the wacky Banjo-Kazooie universe—characters include Mumbo Jumbo, Gruntilda, a Jinjo and, of course, Banjo and Kazooie—and participate in time trials, the one-on-one Jiggy Challenge or numerous Grand Prix cup races (I've encountered eight circuits so far), which contain four courses and a weapon-centric boss duel should you rank in the top three. Being aerial-based, Banjo Pilot has a very different feel from other kart-style GBA racers, as proper vertical positioning for power-ups and speed boosts takes precedence over more traditional racing skills, and victory often comes down to skillful weapon use. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Rare
Publisher: THQ
Available: Q1 2005






Asphalt: Urban GT

Preview

It's taken a while, but Nokia is finally set to release some formidable software for their newly revamped N-Gage. Most notable in the new lineup is Asphalt: Urban GT, an almost shockingly adept racer from Gameloft that allows you to tune and customize licensed machines, earning cash and buying cars as you traverse the Evolution Mode, racing on real-world tracks from New York to Paris. Cop chases, road challenges, Free Race and head-to-head multiplayer are also standard equipment. Aside from its vast array of 4X4s, SUVs, classics, compacts, urban racers, sport coupes and dream cars, all of which are fully tweakable, the game has remarkable graphics and controls surprisingly well, with a nice drift and good sense of speed. **Dave Halverson**

System: N-Gage
Developer: Gameloft
Publisher: Nokia
Available: Q1 2005

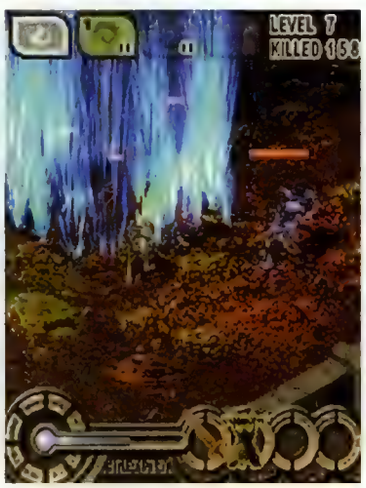



Requiem of Hell

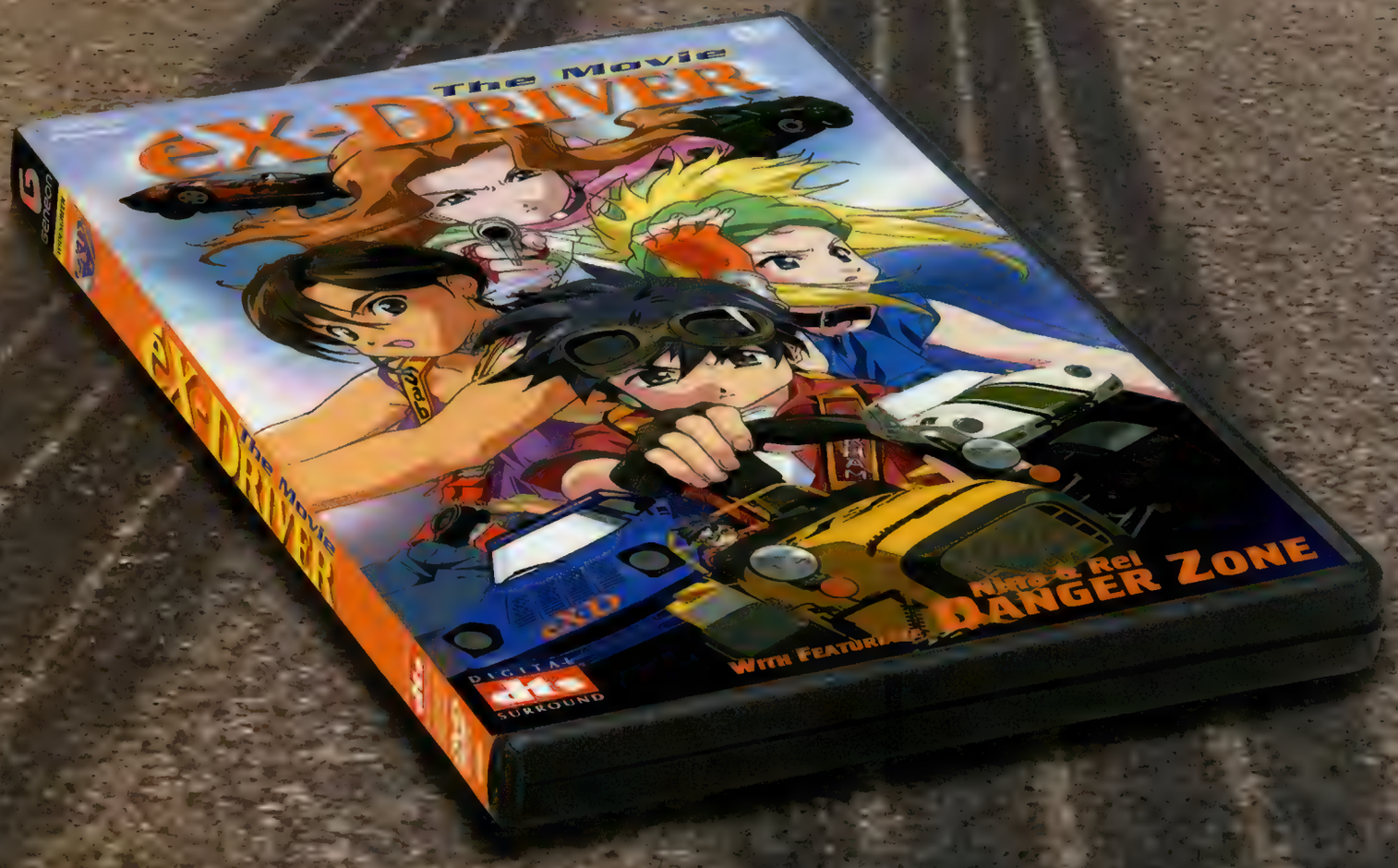
Preview

Yet another promising new game for N-Gage, Requiem of Hell has you playing as a reanimated corpse (sans decomposition), battling through hell towards the ultimate confrontation with a resurrected demon bent on ending all human life. Riding on visuals reminiscent of 3/4-view classics like The Horde, Requiem carries with it console-like accouterments, from sprightly manga-style companion Gigi (all of the art has a nice manga look to it) to a variety of attributes and magic spells. The game also has a killer soundtrack and allows you and a friend (or whomever) to link up via Blue Tooth and slay together. The action here is of the hack, slash, combo and spew magic variety, in between bouts of story and some slick CG cinemas. **Dave Halverson**

System: N-Gage
Developer: Digi-Red
Publisher: Nokia
Available: November




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15-year anniversary feature

Sega Genesis 0;15

Words Chris Hoffman and Dave Halverson

Fifteen years ago, everything changed. It's hard to believe it's been so long, but a decade and a half ago, for many gamers, the world experienced a rebirth. The event in question was the release of the Sega Genesis, and although it wasn't the only next-generation system released at that time, the Genesis is the console that captured so many a gamer's heart and soul. Released as the Mega Drive the year previous in Japan, the Genesis couldn't have been more appropriately named, as it provided a new beginning for Sega (coming off the lackluster performance of the Sega Master System) and for home video gaming in general. Arcade-perfect gameplay at home…high-resolution visuals…and glorious, breathtaking, multilayered parallax. Sega's 16-bit powerhouse did all this and more, as the Genesis changed our perceptions of what console games could be. Who can forget being swept away by the depth of the visuals of Last Battle or being told to "Rise from your grave!" in Altered Beast? For some of us, it was why we fell in love with video gaming and why we're still immersed in it today. After the system debuted with a regional launch on Aug. 15, 1989, a national launch followed in October, complete with peripherals like extra controllers and the Master Base Converter, which let players use Master System games on the Genesis. Hit after hit followed, from arcade-based conversions to original properties to sports titles, overpowering the competition and even doing (in the United States) what no one thought was possible: taking Nintendo's place at the top. Over the years, so many great gaming experiences were created on the Genesis—Sonic, Gunstar Heroes, Toejam & Earl, Aladdin, Landstalker, Streets of Rage, Shining Force, Earthworm Jim, Batman, Ristar—that it would be impossible to list them all here, but read on to relive some of the bright, shining highlights from one of the most memorable eras in all of gaming.



Sega Genesis (original model) System Specs

Processor: Motorola M68000 16-bit processor
Processor Speed: 7.67 MHz
Screen Resolution: 320 x 224 pixels
Video RAM: 64 kilobytes
Max Sprite Size: 32 x 32 pixels
Max On-Screen Sprites: 80
Color Palette: 512
Max On-Screen Colors: 64
Sound Processor: Z80 running at 3.58 MHz
Sound RAM: 8 kilobytes
Main Sound Chip: Yamaha YM2612 6-channel stereo
Secondary Sound Chip: TI 76489 4-channel PSG (programmable sound generator)
Interface: Power switch, reset button, volume control
Input/Output: Two nine-pin control pad ports, RF output, auxiliary RGB output, stereo headphone jack, expansion port on right side (for Sega CD)
Control Pad: Digital directional pad, three gameplay buttons, start button
Approximate System Dimensions: 11" (W) x 2" (H) x 9" (L)
Initial Price: $189.99

Launch Titles



Altered Beast

Packed in with the system, Altered Beast faithfully recreated the hit coin-op.



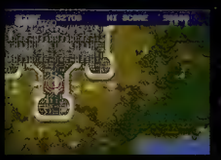
Last Battle

This adaptation of Fist of the North Star was sanitized for the U.S. version. No blood!



Super Thunder Blade

Though primitive by today's standards, the 3D in this game was once mind-blowing.



Thunder Force II

This classic shooter is most memorable for paving the way for its incredible sequels.



Space Harrier II

Space Harrier II was another game to bring the arcade experience home.



Tommy Lasorda Baseball

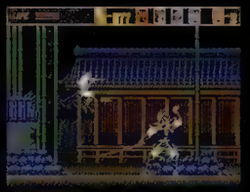
In all its simplicity, there's something about TLB that was incredibly addictive.

The Sega Genesis made its retail debut on Aug. 15, 1989 with exclusive distribution in Los Angeles, CA and New York, NY. Along with the system, which was bundled with Altered Beast, five games were also released: Space Harrier II, Super Thunder Blade, Last Battle, Tommy Lasorda Baseball and Thunder Force II.

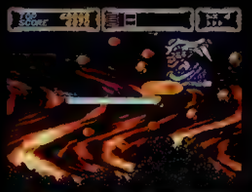


Initial Genesis Launch

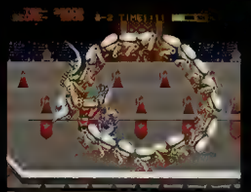
Phantasy Star II



Revenge of Shinobi



Thunder Force III



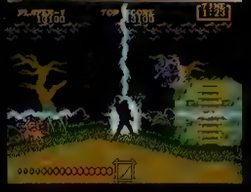
Strider

'89 — '90

National Launch

A couple of months after the limited regional launch, the Genesis began hitting stores nationwide. For many players, a new era in gaming had begun.

Ghouls 'n Ghosts



Golden Axe



Moonwalker



Electronic Arts: The Madden Factor



Electronic Arts and their sports franchises were a huge factor in the Genesis' popularity. John Madden Football made its console debut in late 1990.

Sega Essentials

Ten Genesis games you must own



Gunstar Heroes

Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1993

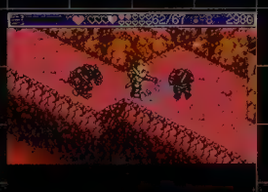
Gunstar Heroes hit the 16-bit world like a ton of bricks. Who were these amazing people seemingly squeezing more out of the Genesis than anyone ever thought possible? Massive explosions, breakneck speeds, the most inspired 2D art style of a generation and a level of kinetic action the likes that we had never seen…that was Gunstar Heroes. The true greats are those games that transcend time, and to this day, firing up GH gets your heart pumping. Simply put, it stands as the greatest 2D action game ever created for Genesis. For most, this was their introduction to Treasure, which remains one of the world's most formidable (not to mention free) developers. Leaving Konami to do as they pleased, they've done just that ever since, much to our benefit.



Dynamite Headdy

Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1994

Treasure's follow-up to Gunstar Heroes, Dynamite Headdy was a very different animal—one that the West wasn't quite ready for but enthusiasts went completely gaga over. Featuring the coolest puppet ever to grace a video game and a cast of freaks, from massive wiener dogs to a disturbing balloon-shaped cat, Headdy's hook was his ability to dawn different heads for different situations amidst a series of collapsing stages and 2D level designs that to this day have never been equaled. Alive with brilliant color and beaming with personality, Dynamite Headdy was one of the first games to integrate flying stages into the action mold and exhibited a level of play mechanics that remain unmatched. They don't make games like this anymore, and they probably never will again.



Landstalker

Developer: Climax Ent.
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1993

The SNES faithful had their Zelda…and we had Landstalker…and it was on. Back then, the console wars really were wars, with both Sega and Nintendo firing off first-party juggernauts like there was no tomorrow, of which Landstalker silenced many a naysayer. Introducing a level of character design, detail and animation the likes we'd never seen in an adventure game, stuffed with some of the most brilliant action puzzles ever devised, you can't even say Landstalker helped shape modern action-RPGs because there still hasn't been one like it. Others tried, but in the world of isometric gaming, Landstalker stands as the pinnacle of the genre.



Castlevania: Bloodlines

Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Release: 1994

As any former mouthpiece for Sega blue will tell you, of all of the SNES vs. Genesis arguments over mode 7, color palettes, music, etc., there were always a few wringers that could stop us cold…as in we had no Contra or, more importantly, Castlevania, and the odds of us getting either seemed nil, making the announcement of Bloodlines one of the happiest days of many a 16-bit life. But would it be any good? Could it even hold a candle to the hallowed SNES Castlevania IV? Yes, and yes… In fact, to this day I say it's a better game. Sure CV IV had the mode 7 tunnel and rotation, but did it have massive multi-jointed bosses, giant skeletons and a pseudo-rotating tower? I think not!

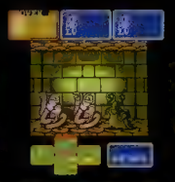


Ranger X

Developer: Gau Entertainment
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1993

Sixteen-bit was a precarious generation. Bad games (not like today; we're talking REALLY bad games) were rampant and mediocrity was the standard, making good games cause for celebration and great ones cause for days with no sleep in order to memorize every last pixel. But there was also an echelon of games so astonishing you just didn't know what to do with yourself, where even the SNES faithful could only look on and drool. Ranger X was such a game. Fusing a sleek physics-laden ultra-modern uni-bike with a highly stylized mech unit doing battle with bosses the likes that we had only dreamed of, it was yet another hardware-defying feat within the magical '93-'95 time frame. Line scrolling, beams of pillowy light and gameplay from the gods—this was, for me, the nail that slammed the system wars door shut.

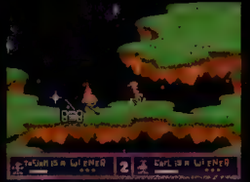
'91



Shining in the Darkness



Joe Montana II



Toejam & Earl



Sega CD

Although it wasn't the first CD console add-on, the Sega CD was nonetheless technologically exciting with its real voice and video capabilities. The $300 unit included three game discs and two music CDs, and some great games followed—including Sonic CD, the Lunar games and Snatcher—as did many poor FMV titles.



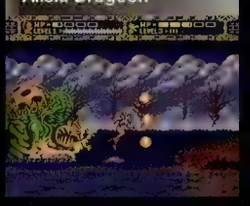
'92

Sonic the Hedgehog

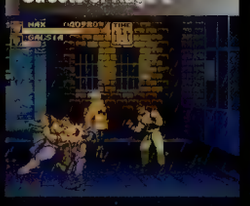
When Sonic the Hedgehog hit the Genesis, the landscape of gaming changed dramatically. The game's super-speed was an epiphany, finally giving Sega a game and a mascot to match Mario, and the era of blast processing began. No fewer than six Sonic sequels/spin-offs appeared on the Genesis in the ensuing years.



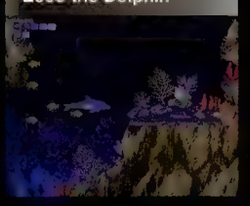
Alisia Dragoon



Streets of Rage II



Ecco the Dolphin



Essentials continued

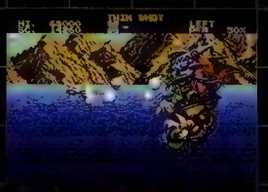
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Earthworm Jim

Developer: Shiny
Publisher: Playmates
Release: 1994

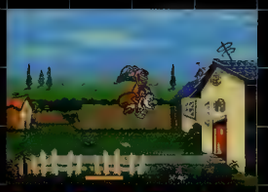
What Gunstar Heroes was to Mega Drive, EWJ was to Genesis. Fresh from the UK, having revolutionized 16-bit with Cool Spot and Aladdin, David Perry and co. (a band of mad scientists including Mike Dietz, Doug TenNapel and Nick Bruty) decided it was time to get medieval on the development community and create something that would stand alone as the greatest 16-bit game ever made. Their idea? A suit from space that fell on a worm. The rest, as they say, is history. Essentially bringing cel animation to life on screen together with more firsts than perhaps any game that preceded it, EWJ remains to this day a legend among 16-bit games if not one of the brightest yet under-realized characters in all of gaming. Now that Interplay is kaput, perhaps we'll get a 3D sequel that will begin the cycle anew.



Lightening Force (Thunder Force IV)

Developer: TechnoSoft
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1992

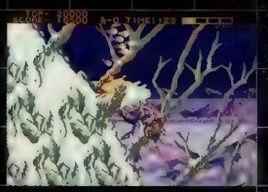
Looking for the mother of all 2D shooters? Well, here it is. I don't care how many bits we're talking about, Lightening Force (aka Thunder Force IV in Japan) is a force to be reckoned with. Just as Axelay will never fall, neither will this. The first 10 minutes of this game remain some of my fondest memories at the controls of a ship—a fusion of metal music and mechanized mayhem that verges on pant-wetting euphoria. Soon after, it melts into a three-screen-high desert assault that makes you question why we ever turned shooters inwards. Sixteen-bit was a sea of shooters, but nobody could touch TechnoSoft. They owned the category and this was their finest hour.



Ren & Stimpy: Stimpy's Invention

Developer: Blue Sky
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1993

Bet you didn't expect this one. Before Blue Sky got in the business of CG filmmaking, they left a couple of notches in the Genesis' belt, including the groundbreaking Vectorman and this little gem, arguably the coolest 2D cartoon game of its time (and the competition was fierce): Stimpy's Invention. Assembling the Mutate-o-Matic meant traversing the twisted landscape of Spumco's ultra-wacky über-toon with perfect renditions of Ren & Stimpy, but moreover represented a marked leap in tethered-buddy play, employing a vast array of moves as Chihuahua and feline used and abused each other as a means of conveyance, attack or just plain humiliation. From farting ascents to the trippiest 2D landscapes of the day, Stimpy's Invention remains one of the most fun, funny and addicting Genesis games.



Strider

Developer: Sega/Capcom
Publisher: Sega
Release: 1990

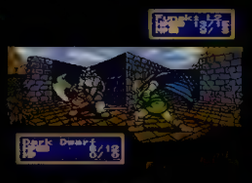
The Genesis faithful didn't have to wait a long time to rub an arcade port into Nintendo lovers' mocking faces, but we never dreamt that chance would come with something as awe-inspiring as Strider (or previously with Ghouls 'n Ghosts). Words cannot explain what this game did to people's brains when it hit the arcades, except to say that the thought of playing it on console was almost too much to bear. But out it came in all of its glory. SOA hacked Strider's amazing "ha-ha-ha" mannerisms in the localization, but anyone with a file and Genesis had long notched out their systems and stepped up to the import. What a celebration it was. Thunder and lightning, snow-covered vistas, jungle babes, the giant mechanized ape… We finally had the arcade at home…with maybe just a touch of flicker.



Crusader of Centy

Developer: Nextech
Publisher: Atlus
Release: 1994

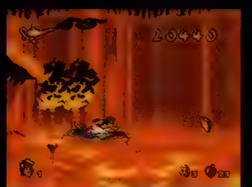
While Landstalker and Beyond Oasis are considered the Genesis' flagship action-RPGs, Crusader of Centy is actually the most Zelda-like game in the arsenal. Best known for a beach scene depicting Sonic kicking it on a lounge, Centy was also one of the most nicely detailed and designed games to ever appear on the system. Touches like leaving footprints in the sand and ground erosion were groundbreaking at the time, and the gameplay—a mixture of puzzle-action platforming and sword play, complete with a locking strafe and spirit animals—was irresistible. The music was also especially good for a Genesis game.



Shining Force



Gunstar Heroes



Aladdin



Sega Virtua Processor chip

Virtua Racing was the only Genesis game released to use Sega's SVP chip, which permitted the use of true 3D polygonal graphics. It carried a hefty price tag: $100.

The Sega Channel

Sega partnered with Time Warner to create the way-before-its-time Sega Channel, letting players download Genesis games for limited play via their cable lines.

'93 '94

Fighting Game Mania

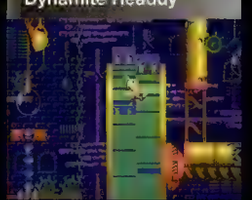
The fighting game craze of the '90s hit the Genesis with the release of Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter II: Special Champion Edition and a corresponding six-button controller.



Earthworm Jim



Dynamite Headdy



Contra: Hard Corps



Sega 32X

The 32X was another upgrade—one that brought 32-bit graphics and 3D capabilities to the Genesis. With a high price and few games, it quickly floundered.



Dave Halverson's Top 10 Genesis List

1. Earthworm Jim (Playmates, 1994)
2. Gunstar Heroes (Sega, 1993)
3. Landstalker (Sega, 1993)
4. Shining in the Darkness (Sega, 1991)
5. Dynamite Headdy (Sega, 1994)
6. Castlevania: Bloodlines (Konami, 1994)
7. Ranger X (Sega, 1993)
8. Revenge of Shinobi (Sega, 1990)
9. Strider (Sega, 1990)
10. Sparkster (Konami, 1994

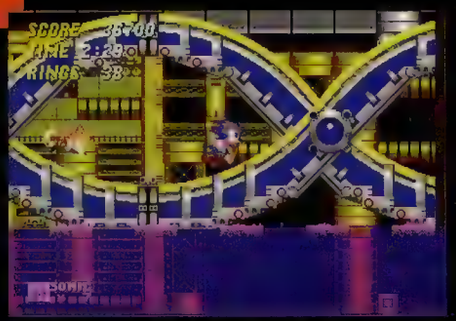


Chris Hoffman's Top 10 Genesis List

1. Golden Axe (Sega, 1989)
2. Revenge of Shinobi (Sega, 1990)
3. Strider (Sega, 1990)
4. Streets of Rage 2 (Sega, 1992)
5. Castle of Illusion: Starring Mickey Mouse (Sega, 1990)
6. Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega, 1991)
7. Ghouls 'n Ghosts (Sega, 1989)
8. Gunstar Heroes (Sega, 1993)
9. Michael Jackson's Moonwalker (Sega, 1990)
10. Mercs (Sega, 1991)

Genesis Still Does

Even 15 years after it debuted, the influence of the Sega Genesis is far from gone. Just recently, Radica Games released a plug-and-play Arcade Legends Sega Genesis unit—essentially a miniature Genesis console with non-interchangeable games. The six titles—Sonic the Hedgehog, Golden Axe, Altered Beast, Flicky, Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine and Kid Chameleon—all boast the original Genesis game code and play flawlessly, although the mono audio isn't as crisp and two-player simultaneous play is unavailable. The controller also mimics the original nicely, and the battery compartment disguised as a model 2 Genesis is a nice touch. Genesis games are also making a comeback via Conspiracy Games' upcoming Sega Ages compilations on PlayStation 2. Previously released individually in Japan, Sega Ages: Classics Collection will present modern updates of at least 10 retro games (such as Gain Ground and Golden Axe), while Sega Ages: Phantasy Star Trilogy will feature remakes of Phantasy Star II and Phantasy Star: The End of the Millennium, as well as the original Phantasy Star from the Sega Master System. The Classics Collection is scheduled for release before the end of the year, while Phantasy Star Trilogy won't hit until 2005.



Brady Fiechter's Top 10 Genesis List

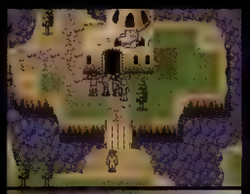
1. Sonic the Hedgehog 2 (Sega, 1992)
2. Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega, 1991)
3. Revenge of Shinobi (Sega, 1990)
4. Phantasy Star II (Sega, 1989)
5. Ghouls 'n Ghosts (Sega, 1989)
6. Gunstar Heroes (Sega, 1993)
7. Golden Axe (Sega, 1989)
8. Flashback (U.S. Gold, 1993)
9. Tommy Lasorda Baseball (Sega, 1989)
10. Castle of Illusion: Starring Mickey Mouse (Sega, 1990)



Michael Hobbs' Top 10 Genesis List

1. Gunstar Heroes (Sega, 1993)
2. Sonic the Hedgehog (Sega, 1991)
3. Strider (Sega, 1990)
4. Thunder Force III (TechnoSoft, 1990)
5. Ghouls 'n Ghosts (Sega, 1989)
6. Revenge of Shinobi (Sega, 1990)
7. Gaiares (Renovation, 1990)
8. Ranger X (Sega, 1993)
9. Aladdin (Sega, 1993)
10. Streets of Rage (Sega, 1991)





Phantasy Star: EOTM

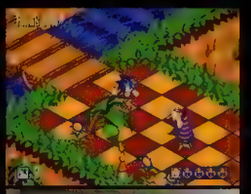
May 11, 1995 was a bittersweet day for Sega fans. It marked the introduction of the new, 3D Saturn system, but that also meant that the Genesis' life cycle was near its end.



Saturn: Successor to the Genesis



X-Perts



Sonic 3-D Blast



Virtua Fighter 2

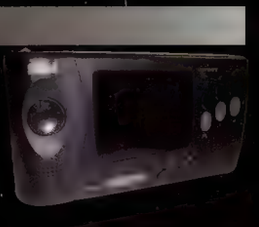
'95 '96

Comix Zone



Sega Nomad

The Sega Nomad was a handheld version of the Genesis. The allure of 16-bit portable gaming, as well as the huge library of hit games, made it instantly appealing.



Vectorman



Sega Genesis Version 3

Even though the Genesis had pretty much run its course, Majesco released a petite third version of the system in 1997, letting players experience its legacy at a bargain price.



play anime

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AND LOOKS GOOD DOING IT?

HER NAME IS MIKURA AND SHE'S ALL ABOUT SERVICE WITH A SMILE.

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Chrono Crusade

Delivering us from evil...or to it?

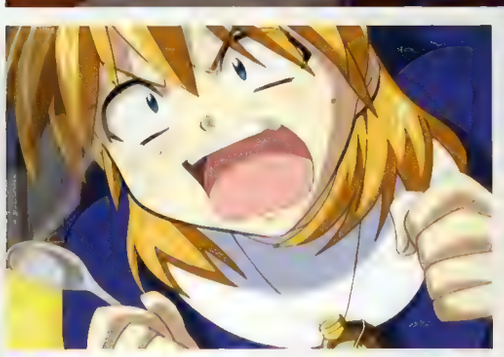
Soultaker, *Hellsing* and *Witch Hunter Robin* are all modern excursions into the macabre, hinging on some sort of paradox. They also all weigh in on the serious side, which is where *Chrono Crusade*, like the upcoming *Full Metal Alchemist*, veers from the path. Its demonic overtones certainly match the bravado of its dark predecessors, but when it comes to the light, cheeky stuff, dichotomy doesn't begin to describe it. There are few subjects as compelling as the diametrically opposed, and little Sister Rosette ("little" as in teenage—although you wouldn't know it by her cup size—and Sister as in nun) and Chrono the devil take the proverbial cake. Set in the late '20s, these two crazy kids sop up hell's afterbirth as it comes spewing into the material plane after becoming bound when Rosette and her little brother stumbled across Chrono when he was just a cute little devil one day in church—a union that caused her brother to fade into oblivion. Years later, we find Rosette, now a nun/exorcist in training, and Chrono the best of friends...when she's not almost killing him in the Model T they use to get around in, or in battle where everything within a block radius is susceptible to demolition (she's a touch trigger happy).

Between assignments back at the convent (and God I love anime, because with the current state of the Catholic church, only anime could ever get away with it), the resident mad alchemist, Elder (what Q is to the British Secret Service, he is to The Order), is a flagrant old pervert who likes to peer up Rosette's skirt and make jokes about, well, you catch my drift. So, in summary, we have a young nun fused with a devil-slaying demon, with weapons made by a perverted alchemist... Lord have mercy! **Dave Halverson** **A-**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1 - "A Plague of Demons"

"...these two crazy kids sop up hell's afterbirth as it comes spewing into the material plane..."

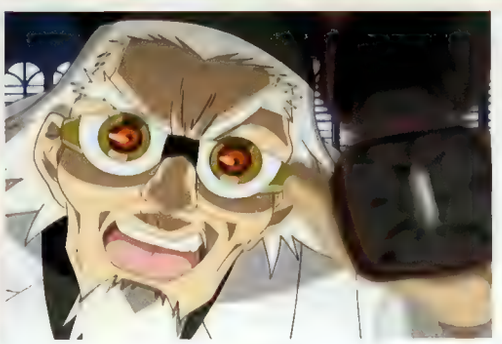














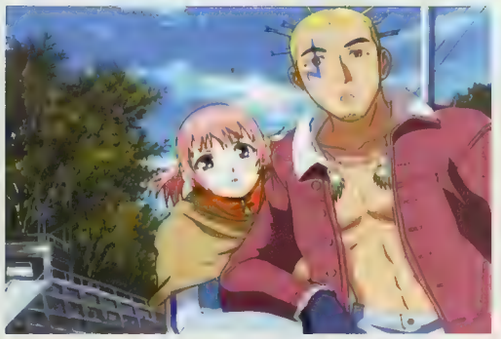
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Mezzo

Meet anime's new action c







Great anime begins with great character design, and while that may sound like a fairly rudimentary observation, anime is, to some degree, redundant. Select few shows have leads so striking that they register as instantly extraordinary, and *Mezzo*'s Mikura Suzuki (created by Yasuomi Umetsu, who gave us *Kite*) is one of them. Young, illegally cute, sexy and as lethal as strychnine, her leap to TV is one to celebrate, as *Mezzo TV* is without a doubt one of the most well-produced and animated TV series created to date, with shading, coloring, background detail, animation and just the right amount of digital effects as extraordinary as the episodes themselves.

Mikura is the go-to girl in the Danger Service Agency, a small team of vigilantes for hire (working out of a double-decker bus, no less) who will take any case, any time, regardless of the implications or risk, and it's no wonder; Mikura is so totally bad-ass there's simply nothing she can't handle. Set in a not-so-distant-future where cyborgs and advanced technology have given rise to soaring (and always potentially lethal) crime, *Mezzo TV* is pure crime serial infused with action and storylines that obliterate the vast majority of what's out there.

Director Rob Cohen of *XXX* and *The Fast and the Furious* fame is said to be directing a live-action version of *Kite*, so we may see the live-action equivalent of Umetsu's work in the near future. This would be most awesome, and he's definitely the right man for the job. In the meantime, don't you dare miss *Mezzo TV*. **Dave Halverson A-**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 & Up
Running Time: 125 Minutes
Volume: 1

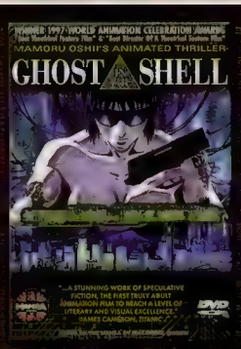
"...Mikura is so totally bad-ass there's simply nothing she can't handle."

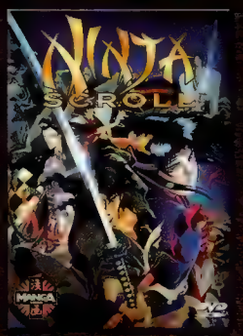


Mikura's as at home with a semi-automatic pistol as she is a bowl of ramen.



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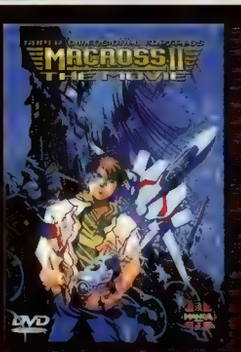
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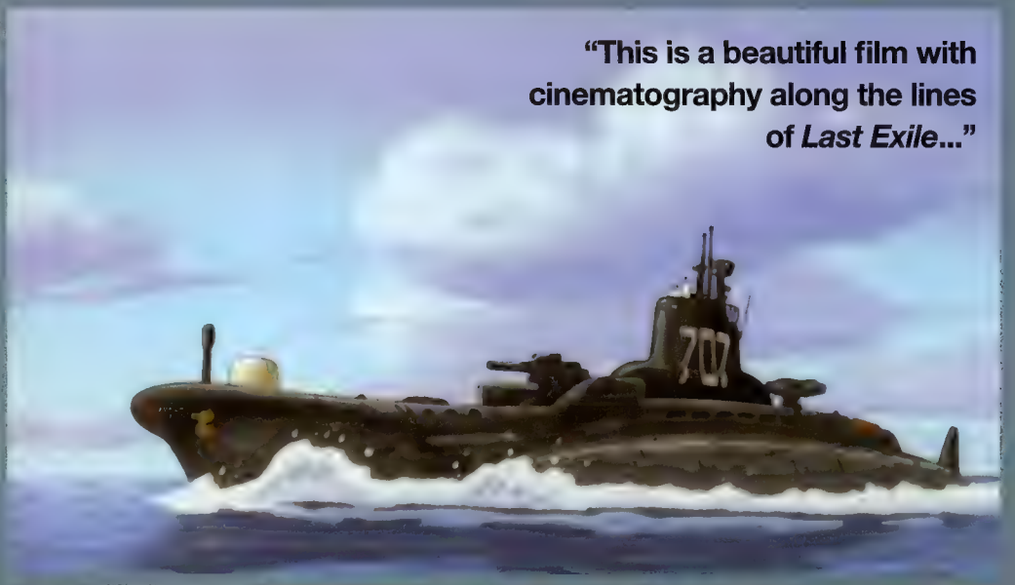
Submarine 707 Revolution

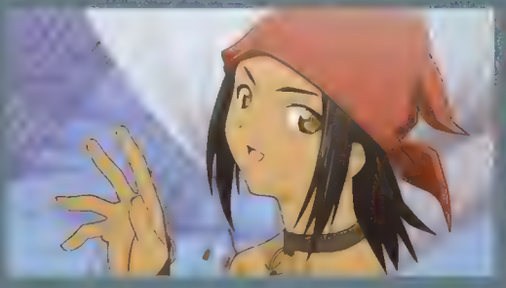
Terrorist on the high seas

The best thing to hit the open seas since *Blue Submarine No. 6*, *Submarine 707 Revolution: The Movie* moves the genre ever closer to sea-bearing military bliss. Like *Blue Submarine*, *707* fuses CG with traditional animation, only with more subtlety, on top of production values that resemble a big-budget Hollywood epic more than a one-shot animated feature. This is a beautiful film with cinematography along the lines of *Last Exile* (which *707* character designer Minoru Murao also worked on) and pacing and refinement similar to the untouchable *Wings of Honnimease*. The story, about an allied world force, the PKN, assembled to extinguish rogue terrorist extraordinaire Capt. Red, who's bent on fulfilling his vision of a future utopia (deep emotional scarring has rendered him an extremist with a mean submarine), moves skillfully between oceanic battles and well-paced drama, threading its way through sub-plots in pseudo-Aaron Spelling fashion. With some of the most impressive animated explosions and soaring vistas ever seen on the open seas and a story as compelling as its action, you'd be well served to set a heading in *707*'s direction. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 15 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes

"This is a beautiful film with cinematography along the lines of *Last Exile*..."















"...more skeletons in his closet than a *Scooby-Doo* marathon..."

Lunar Legend Tsukihime

She is risen! And in one helluva foul mood.

As a young boy, Shiki Tohno was cursed with the peculiar ability to visualize the threads of life like exposed nerves—a gift called The Mystic Eyes of Death Perception, silenced by a pair of special glasses given to him by a mage (after his father was compelled to send him away to live with his uncle). Presently, as a young man, the ability has apparently reached its sell-by date, manifesting itself in gruesome ritualistic fashion. When a strange fascination with a beautiful young girl leads him to surgically hack her into 17 pieces using the threads of life like a road map for his blade, things begin to get ugly...and then, not, as no sooner she reappears, understandably peeved that he killed her. The girl (bad move, Shiki) was Arcueid Brunestud, the strongest vampire destined to kill vampires to ever walk the Earth, in town for her 800-year slaughter when Shiki went all Hannibal Lechter on her, and now she's proposing a merger (as in joining forces) in return. You have to love this; you love this, right? *She* is the most powerful vampire on the spectral plane; *he* has more skeletons in his closet than a *Scooby-Doo* marathon, and we're only into episode 4. Is Shiki a normal high-school student or a killing machine? Only his vampire knows for sure...and soon enough, so will we. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 16 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "Life Threads"


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Paranoia Agent
THE MADNESS SPREADS 10.26.04
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Aquarian Age

Pop infused; sleep inducing

Aquarian Age sounds aquatic and mysterious, but what we find instead, at least in the maiden episodes, is a rather cliché story about a reality just beyond the veil of our own, where supreme beings (ever play Psychic Force? They're a lot like them, fighting in the sky and bickering simultaneously) are in a sort of limbo, waiting for their reluctant leader Yoriko to get with the program and stop playing human. See, she's busy deciding whether or not she wants to be the main squeeze of Kyouta, the lead singer in an up-and-coming (rancidly bad) pop band consisting of a dweeb synth player and the anime version of Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*. Understated yet popular in school (the most overused archetype running), Kyouta comes off as frustratingly humble and naïve (content to run his family's convenience store if the music thing doesn't pan out) to the point that I began to nod off at the sight of him.

There are some things to hang onto playing in the background as these first few episodes drag by; however, with so much great anime out there, filled with charismatic characters and rich scenarios, *Aquarian Age* comes off as a typical forbidden love story with sci-fi on the side—a swollen category filled with better alternatives. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 and up
Running Time: 125 minutes
Volume: 1 - "The Awakening"

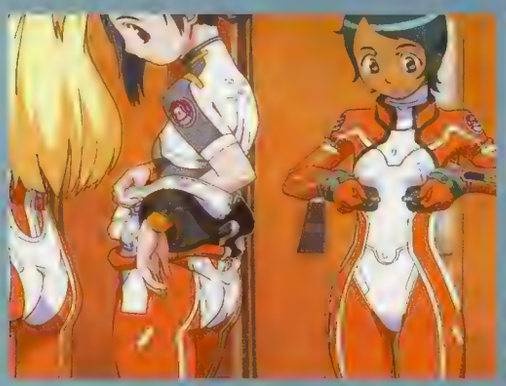








"...*Aquarian Age* comes off as a typical forbidden love story with sci-fi on the side..."









"...future youths coming of age without putting us to sleep."

Stellvia

Green days

From Xebec, who brought us the stupendous *Martian Successor Nadesico*, comes yet another space opera primed to suck countless hours from the lives of anyone with an inkling for teenage angst in outer space. Reminiscent of *Silent Ryvius* (though not quite as "Lord of the Flies") and more fun than droves of similar fare, *Stellvia* promises all of the intrigue of bubbly young future youths coming of age galaxies away from home. The setting is 2356, 189 years after the star Hydras Beta went supernova and peeled back the Earth's crust like an orange, not to mention turning the atmosphere green. As the planet prepares for the ensuing shockwave (which could be even worse), high school computer whiz Shima Katase is off to Stellvia Academy to train as a pilot and hopefully fulfill her lifelong dream to one day see the universe as people did before the cataclysmic event. The first disc, like any good precursor, introduces us to Shima's mother, who's suffering from a wicked case of separation anxiety, bit players galore (this one is going deep) and her early tribulations as a pilot, which she's finding is nothing like being a computer whiz. The spirited and mostly light (at least so far) *Stellvia* features nicely integrated CG, geat mechanical designs, rich colors and backgrounds and, most notably, the kind of exceptional future lore and ritual that you know is going to hook you for the long haul. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 13 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "Foundation 1"

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why is ayumu involved in their dangerous games?

can he save the blade children?



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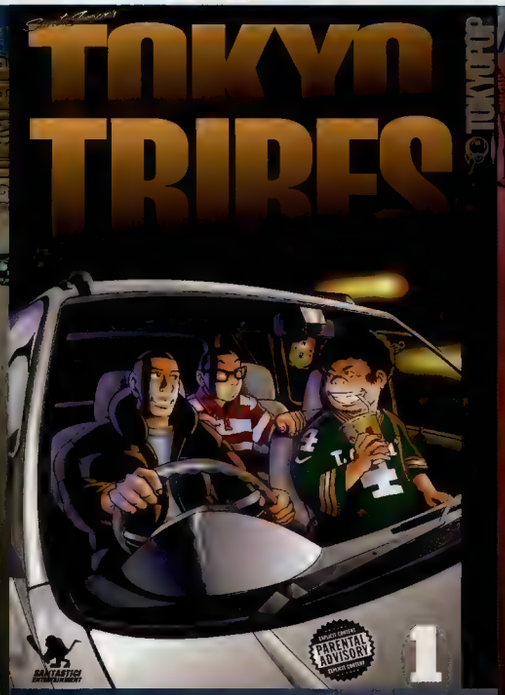
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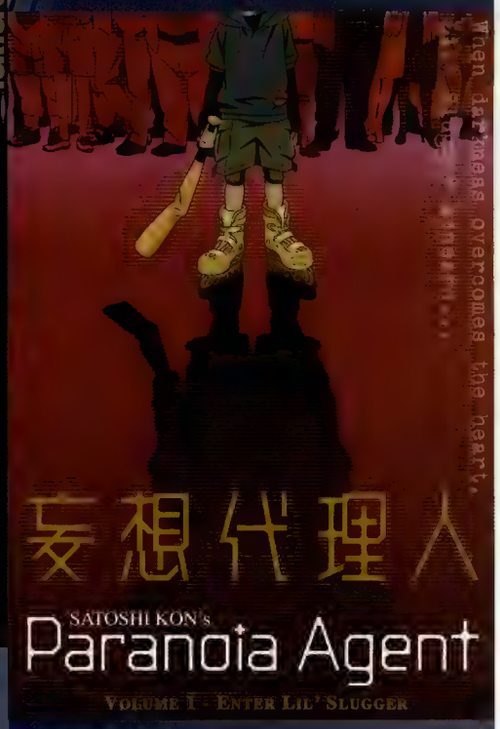


Culdcept
Publisher: TokyoPop
Now Reading: Vol. 2
You've played the game (haven't you?); now you can read the manga (and it's a stunner) about the card-shaped relics that power the book that controls the universe.



Tokyo Tribes
Publisher: TokyoPop
Now Reading: Vol. 2
The coolest, freshest thing to happen to paper since Battle Royale. Tokyo Tribes submerges us in a surreal look at urban youth. Part fantasy, part reality, completely awesome reading.

watch this



Paranoia Agent
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Because we care about you, the reader, we're going to have to insist you check out the latest from Satoshi Kon, because we can all use a Lil' Slugger now and then.

listen to this



Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi
Publisher: Epic Records
To celebrate *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi*, their new show debuting on Cartoon Network on Nov. 19, Ami and Yumi have put together a soundtrack spanning their nine-year career, featuring some of their best. Ultra-sticky *Teen Titans* theme included.



Japan For Sale vol.4
Publisher: Tofu Records
The fourth volume in the mighty contagious series features a wide range of acts, from the powerful L'Arc-en-Ciel and Guitar Wolf to the retro-techno feel of POLYSICS, the sultry Aiha Higurashi and the masterful creations of DJ Krush and Boom Boom Satellites.



Evil's Return
Publisher: TokyoPop
Now Reading: Vol. 2
You'd think they'd be after her body, but it's her blood they want! Underneath Yumi's curvy exterior lies a wicked curse. A group called "Heavenly Father" wants it; Chali and a mysterious monk vow to protect it.



Dead Leaves
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
We've spouted about it for months, and now you can finally go out and buy it! So no excuses! This will rock your world. Run it on a loop and watch the pounds melt away.

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Lady Death**	*adv films*
02	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
03	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
04	**Invader Zim, Progressive Stupidity**	*media blasters*
05	**Ninja Scroll TV**	*urban vision*
06	**Gungrave**	*geneon entertainment*
07	**Gad Guard**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**Stratos 4**	*bandai entertainment*
09	**Tokyo Godfathers**	*columbia triStar*
10	**Cowboy Bebop**	*bandai entertainment*

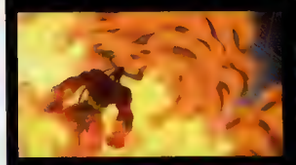


Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
02	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
03	**Paranoia Agent**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Mezzo TV**	*adv films*
05	**Requiem from the Darkness**	*geneon entertainment*
06	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
07	**Submarine 707R**	*geneon entertainment*
08	**R.O.D TV**	*geneon entertainment*
09	**TEXHNOLYZE**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**Ikki-Tousen**	*geneon entertainment*



your megastore beckons!



Lady Death
adv films

The comic book queen of the damned has arrived on DVD. Watch out, Satan!

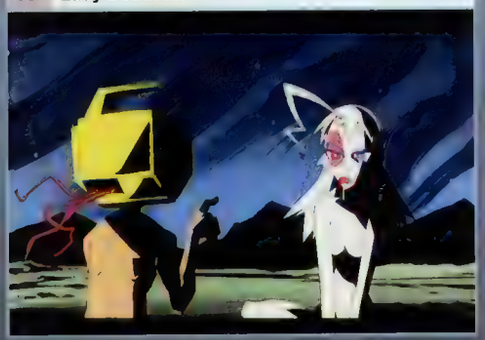


Dead Leaves
manga entertainment

Experience animated bliss! Manga's Dead Leaves is the animation event of the year!

Dave Halverson

01	**Dead Leaves**	*manga entertainment*
02	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
03	**Mezzo TV**	*adv films*
04	**Requiem from the Darkness**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Lady Death**	*adv films*



ADV Films' Rod Peters

01	**Mezzo TV**	*adv films*
02	**Lady Death**	*adv films*
03	**Requiem from the Darkness**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Fullmetal Alchemist**	*funimation productions*
05	**Sister Princess**	*adv films*



Nelson Lui

01	**Chrono Crusade**	*adv films*
02	**Dokkoida!?**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**Stellvia**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Stratos 4**	*bandai entertainment*
05	**Gokusen**	*media blasters*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**Gundam SEED**	*bandai entertainment*
02	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC**	*manga/bandai entertainment*
03	**R.O.D TV**	*geneon entertainment*
04	**Gungrave**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Last Exile**	*geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Battle Royale vol.9**	*tokyopop manga*
02	**FLCL vol.2**	*tokyopop manga*
03	**Battle Vixens vol.4**	*tokyopop manga*
04	**Evil's Return vol.2**	*tokyopop manga*
05	**Culdcept vol.1**	*tokyopop manga*

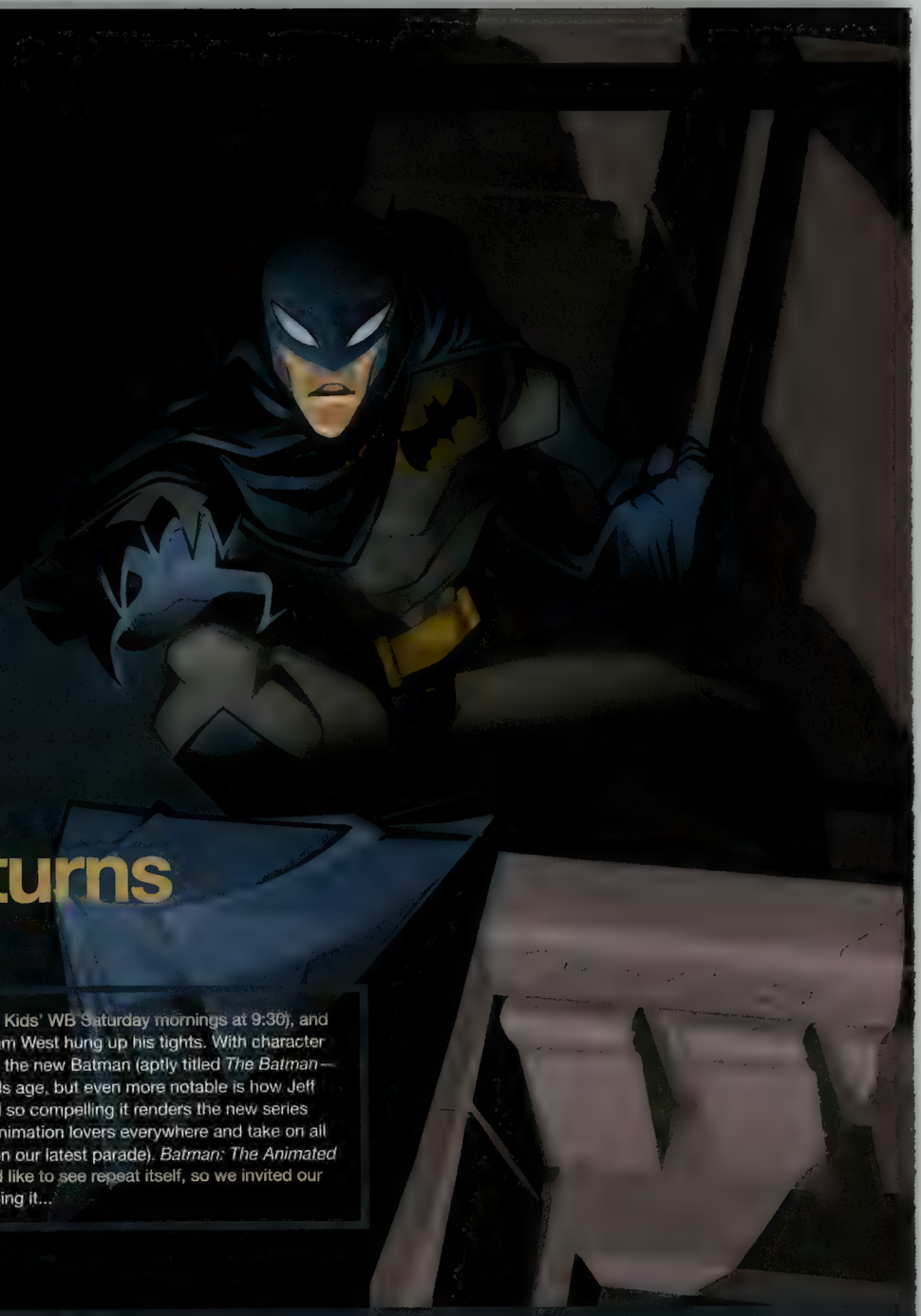
Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**Neo Japan Neo Soul**	*tofu records*
02	**Nami Tamaki: Greeting**	*tofu records*
03	**T.M. Revolution: Seventh Heaven**	*tofu records*
04	**Ai Yori Aoshi OST**	*geneon anime music*
05	**Yoko Ishida: Sweets**	*geneon anime music*

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The Batman Returns

Not the same Bat time; not the same Bat channel

In case you haven't noticed, there's a new Batman in town (airing on the Kids' WB Saturday mornings at 9:30), and this might just be the coolest iteration of the Caped Crusader since Adam West hung up his tights. With character designs by renowned comic book artisan come producer Jeff Matsuda, the new Batman (aptly titled *The Batman*—check the old-school logo too), like all great comic book heroes, transcends age, but even more notable is how Jeff and co. at the WB have injected DC's prize franchise with a newfound cool so compelling it renders the new series suitably evolved, ready once again to swing into the hearts and minds of animation lovers everywhere and take on all comic book comers. (Let's just hope the next live-action film doesn't rain on our latest parade). *Batman: The Animated Series* spawned some great games, movies, toys, the works...a trend we'd like to see repeat itself, so we invited our long-time comrade over to Play HQ to fill us in on how he's planning on doing it...

Interview

Jeff Matsuda, producer/art director on *The Batman*

play: *Batman* airs on Kids' WB, but let's be honest—this is as much for adults who grew up on Batman as it is for the kids. It's nice to see a show that understands the primal link between pre-pubescent males and men who refuse to let go of their childhood.

Jeff Matsuda: It really is for adults and kids alike. I don't believe in "dumbing things down" for kids. Kids are capable of understanding a lot more than people give them credit for.

Your first full-on producing gig and it's Batman... What's that feel like? Do you feel the weight of the fans...like you have to take up the shovel after the abysmal *Batman & Robin*, or are you just doing your own thing and having fun with it?

I was made producer halfway through the production. I was art director before that. It feels great beyond words to produce the new Batman show. I don't feel a tremendous weight from the fans, but I do hope they enjoy it. We're setting out to make a show for the existing fans and to bring in new ones. We don't think of the films much; we're much more focused on making a show with our vision.

What are the new show's origins? Did the WB approach you to do conceptual work or come to you once they had a basic outline for the series?

Well, basically my involvement began at a lunch I had with Sam Register, who is the senior vice president of content development at Cartoon Network. While we were scarfing down Japanese food, he asked if I would have any interest in doing designs for a possible new Batman animated series. He must have seen my eyes bulge and drool collecting on my lips, because before I could say a word, he told me to relax, it probably won't happen. That ended the conversation for that day, but I couldn't stop thinking of the possibilities, so, like most artists, I went home and pretended the show would happen and drew well into the morning. Sam eventually wanted to see more and more sketches 'til the day we had a meeting with Warner Bros. and Cartoon Network people. This is when I first met Alan Burnett from the previous Batman animated series. I laid out the designs on the table, and they were totally different takes on Bat's rogues' gallery, so I was a little nervous about how they would be received. Then Bruce Timm [co-creator of *The Animated Series*] walks in and wonders what's going on. Now, I was thinking he would come from the "What in the world are you doing with these characters?" point of view, but he seemed to really like the new takes on the villains and had a number of great suggestions as well! It's been a roller coaster ride ever since.

What does producing each episode entail? Do you sign off on story...storyboards...oversee every layer of creation?

Being art director/producer, I do look over most aspects of production right now. I go over everything to make sure it's all in line with our show themes and sensibilities. My emphasis is more on art direction due to the enormity of developing a new show that comes with such a rich history



> "We really had no interest in telling the exact same stories with a new coat of paint; instead we felt we're extracting the essence of the time-tested Batman mythos and putting our reverent spin on it." *-Jeff Matsuda, producer/art director*

and fan base. There are two supervising producers on the show as well: Mike Goguen, who oversees the art side and post production, and Duane Capizzi, who oversees the writing side as writer and story editor. They are both great to work with and awesome at what they do.

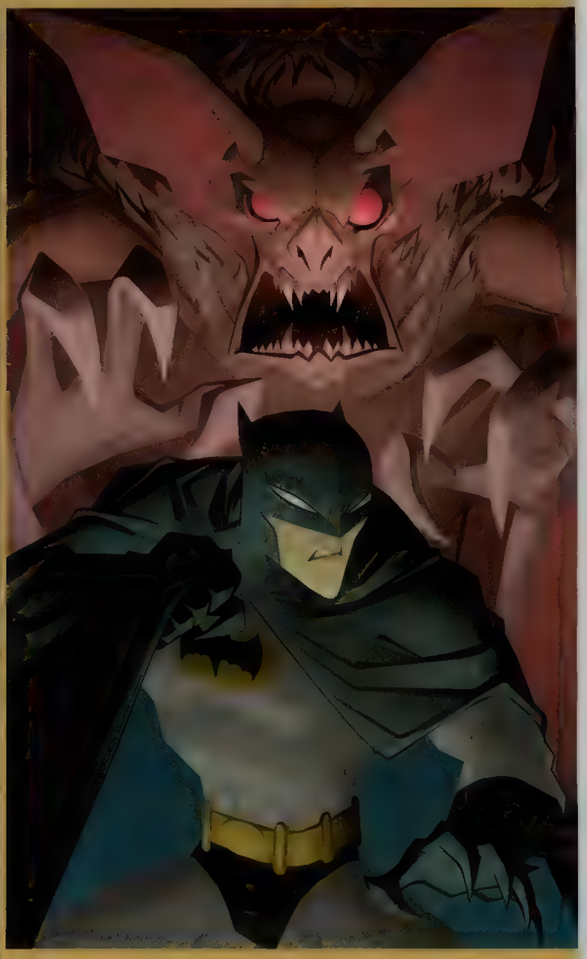
You've managed to get an amazing level of quality out of the Korean studio system; in fact, it may be the best-looking U.S./Korean venture ever. How are you achieving this? The WB moniker must be a big plus.
I agree that the level of quality the Korean studios are putting into our show is astounding. I think there are many factors that contribute to the rise in quality. On our side, we make sure they get full model packs, with five-point turns and expression sheets to amplify key moments and areas that we feel might be hard for them to illustrate. We also send multiple mouth charts to cover a single character's wide range of emotions, which may seem excessive, but characters like the Joker really can run the gamut of emotions in a single sentence. We're also implementing CG vehicles to take the weight off of the animators overseas. We just felt if they didn't need to take the time to draw a car going around a corner (which is incredibly tough and hard to pull off well) then their time would be freed up to make the remaining animation that much better. I think it's really made a difference, and you guys won't have to look at wonky cars in the show! There is also the reality of once you build the asset you can reuse it for the rest of the episodes. On the Korean studio side, they are really making a concerted effort to stay on-model and, on many occasions, make the characters even better than we intended. They are really putting their top teams on *Batman* and it shows. And yes, the WB moniker helps quite a bit. I'm pretty sure everyone realizes the enormity of the franchise to WB, and everyone is really pulling together to make a great show.

I love the new bat suit and what you've done with the Joker, Riddler, Bane, Gotham…the works. This series seems an even fresher vision than the now-legendary *Batman: The Animated Series*. DC has given you a ton of freedom. How have you managed this level of creative license? You slip the execs a Mickey or what?
No chemicals were used, but I am really impressed with DC and their level of trust in us. Like you said, we really wanted a fresh, new version of the show for the fans and kids alike, and they are really letting us do it. I see *Batman: The Animated Series* as an animated version of the best stories the comics had to offer, coupled with great visuals. We really had no interest in telling the exact same stories with a new coat of paint; instead we felt we're extracting the essence of the time-tested Batman mythos and putting our reverent spin on it. The area we played around the most is the villains; personally I wanted to update the looks a bit to make them more relevant. An example would be our portrayal of gangsters, or the criminal element. A lot of Batman villains have a 1940s' gangster motif in their costumes, Scarface and Ventriloquist, Joker…well, I don't see why that particular design motif needs to be carried into 2004. We're not attempting to jump onto fads and date our show; I just think we have valid current motifs as well. One of our goals is to really reach a whole new generation of kids and turn them on to Batman. To us, Batman is an icon we've loved since childhood through comics, movies and cartoons. A lot of young kids today weren't around for the movies, too young for the cartoon, and just don't read comics anymore. We want to get that crowd and turn them on to the Batman cartoon and get them back into comic book stores as well!

So the show takes place three years into Bruce Wayne's crusade as Batman. Would that make this a prequel or do you see it as more of a retelling?
I would say more of a prequel. He will eventually grow into the older Batman, as will all of his enemies. Granted, there are some liberties being taken, mostly on the villains, but their essences are firmly intact. Bane was still created in the jungle, has a chemical juice that he has pumped into his body via tubes that makes him a strong, mean, pissed-off individual. I just never liked the idea of a big buff guy, who already looks strong as an ox, pressing a button then trying to get across to us that now he's super strong. Sure his veins pop out more, but I thought there should be a more obvious physical manifestation of his change, much like our favorite gamma-irradiated scientist. It gives him a more distinct silhouette, which is paramount in character design. Look at Mickey Mouse, Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog—all have unmistakable silhouettes. That's what I want for Bane and the rest of the villains.

Will there be any direct-to-video movies? Will they be slightly more edgy?
Yes, and they will blow your mind with GTA-like violence. Just kidding, the Broadcast Standards and Practices usually will let us be a bit more edgy.

You've ditched the heavy neo-Goth and stone gargoyles to give Gotham a cleaner retro look, setting its darker hues against vivid skies. Was there much back and forth about the look of the city?
There wasn't much back and forth at all. Sam mentioned he didn't want gargoyles and none of us really wanted them either. We wanted a Gotham that was a unique entity unto itself. In order to fully realize what we wanted for Gotham, we hired my buddy Nollan Obena for background stylus. I worked with Nollan, or, as we like to call him, Nox, on *Jackie Chan Adventures*. The man's abilities are out of this world, and he was the DJ at my wedding as well; what can't he do? So Nox and I just talked about what we wanted Gotham to look like, and we settled on a 1920s' Chicago mixed with Prague. We knew Prague's ornate Byzantine architecture would give our Batman a unique skyline to operate with. The background color stylus is Dave McCaig; he's responsible for the beautiful colors in our backgrounds. His palette is striking and totally resolved. We've worked on a lot of comic book work together, so when I needed a colorist for development of the show, Dave was the only choice. In our version of Batman, the nighttime skies are more vibrant and colorful. I know it goes against conventional night, but I really like the silhouettes and contrast it provides. Like you mentioned before, it's really reminiscent of *Gad Guard*.

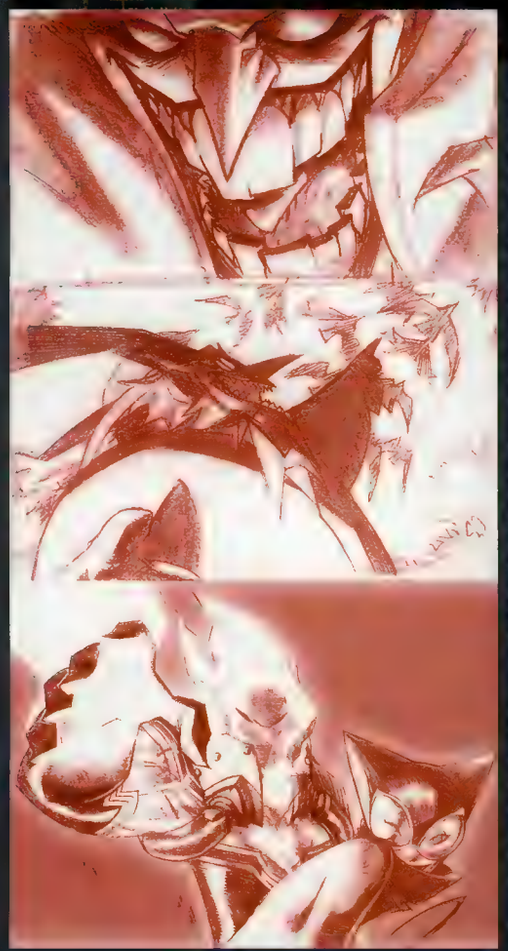


The lighting passes and subtle effects like tire smoke and the rain bouncing off of Batman… Are both the animation and effects being done in Korea, or are you adding layers?
Everything is done in Korea. All the effects are called for here by the directors or producers and implemented in Korea by the studios. *The Batman* is a pretty effect-heavy show, and pulling effects references for overseas is really time-consuming, but the directors are all top-notch and care enough to put all the extra crazy hours in.

Did I sense a slight homage to The Matrix at the end of episode one? Amazing silhouette work in that scene too. Will all the big confrontations be as stylized?
Yeah, one of our directors popped that in. A lot of the times, our big confrontations will definitely have an extra dose of style in them. Bat's first confrontation with Penguin in the uplit tree is a good example. Hi-con color treatment with harsh blacks everywhere against a blood-red background.



Jeff's amazing art style applied to the Batman universe is mind-bogglingly cool.



You use a lot of anime techniques in the production (long shots, panning, shaky cam, parallax, motion BGs) as does the other coolest toon on TV, *Teen Titans*. Are you influenced at all by anime studios like Gonzo or Madhouse?
We use a lot of different techniques pulled from anime, movies, videos, anywhere we can. All the techniques we use are to progress the story, not just a camera trick for the sake of a camera trick. Our directors are hardcore movie fanatics and really try to implement movie camera moves into the animation. They're really doing things that you don't see on Saturday morning cartoons. Would you mind if I mentioned their names? They've really contributed so much to the series: Brandon Vietti, Sam Liu and Seung Kim.

What shows, if any, influence you...have influenced your career?
When I was a little kid, I used to love *Superfriends*, *Battle of the Planets*, *Johnny Quest*, the old Marvel super heroes (you know, when Captain America throws his mighty shield), *Robotech*, *Squiddly Diddly*, *Batman: The Animated Adventures*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Soul Taker*, *Gad Guard*, *FLCL*, *Teen Titans*...the list is too long to mention. *Ninja Scroll* was huge to me, 'cause I really loved the character designs in it. I felt the villains were so original, just pushed beyond what everyone else does, from a dude that has bees come out of his back to a ninja that comes out of his shadow pool. The other day at the studio I was introduced to the original character designer from *Ninja Scroll* who was here for the Anime Expo in Long Beach. He was in my office looking at the villain redesigns and said he loved them, and even asked to take a picture of our Batman maquette! Afterwards I realized I released the contents of my bladder, but I didn't care. I walked around the rest of the day like a zombie.

Once the show gets to the animation studio, how long does it take to make, and how many people? Is the process much faster with digital techniques?
I don't want to get into specifics of how long the animation is overseas and that kind of stuff, mainly because I don't want to bore everyone to tears, but I would say the number-one factor in animation is the team you work with in the studio. I have been blessed with the *Batman* crew; they are all consummate professionals and a joy to work with. They all understand what it takes to make a great show and are super-efficient in doing so. When people understand the process, they sort of trim the fat as they go, which significantly speeds things up!

How does one get The Edge to produce their theme song?
That's all Sam Register. He was responsible for the *Teen Titans* getting Puffy Amiyumi and Tom Jones with the Flaming Lips for *Duck Dodgers*. He just has a natural knack for putting that stuff together.

How did you get into the comic business?
In 1992, I lived in Chicago and I sent my sample pages to Image comics, specifically Extreme Studios and Wildstorm. A week later I got a call from Rob Liefeld and I moved to California. I didn't know anyone out here, but I was so excited to get a crack at comics. Image was just beginning to grow at the time and it was overwhelming for me, being able to hang out with Erik Larsen, Rob Liefeld, Jim Lee and Todd McFarlane.

And the segue into TV...how'd that come about?
I have a good friend, Hak Kang, who's now a background stud on *Teen Titans* who was working at Sony at the time. He called me and said that some guys at Sony wanted me to draw some designs for a new show they're pitching on Jackie Chan. I agreed to do them and would



Half-Life gets the Matsuda treatment. With any luck, we'll see some of Jeff's designs in a game very soon.

draw sketches from time to time, never expecting to get the gig. One day I got called into Sony and they told me I got the job, and the show was *Jackie Chan Adventures*. It was a crazy situation, because comics and animation are two very different animals. I was dropped into the world of animation as a supervisor and quickly learned how different the disciplines of comics and animation were. In comics, you're trying to make a character look appealing from one specific angle for a panel, so you can tweak away with perspective and take liberties on the drawing. The temptation was that you could hide potential drawing weaknesses by cropping, composition, whatever. In animation, you have to understand structure and how things turn in space. It's hard to cheat a five-point turn for a model sheet. So I ended up really studying and understanding the ins and outs of character design. I'm always learning, and there are so many people in the studios to learn from. Since I've been at Warner Bros., I've been fortunate enough to become buddies with Glen Murakami, producer on both *Teen Titans* and *The Batman*. He's a great guy and has been such an enormous help. When we're not trying to map out better ways to get into work on the freeways, we're usually talking about methods to make our characters better.

When you're not producing animation or drawing, what are your hobbies?
Well, most of my time goes to family since I just had a kid in July. He has altered my sleep schedule quite a bit, but I still find time for my favorite hobbies, basketball and video games. Basketball is a great stress reliever and video games just bring a smile to my face, most of the time. (Please let me save where I want, and don't make me trek back fifty minutes to pick up a keycard.)

So what games are you playing these days?
I'm big into multiplayer, LAN or party games. When I get some friends together we love to play Bomberman on the Super NES, Circuit Breakers on PlayStation; both are old-school but perfect. On the PC we play co-op Ghost Recon missions, Battlefield, that kind of stuff. Recently I've been playing Doom 3 and I'm pretty amazed at how good it looks on my computer with all the settings on low (grumble). I've been waiting to get a new computer for Half-Life 2, but I'm not buying anything 'til I hear a gone gold announcement. The reason I'm playing Doom 3 with all the settings low is because I bought my laptop when I thought HL2 was coming out and now a year later it's chuggin'. Can't fool me twice. I'm dying to play Half-Life 2, but I'm hoping the time I put into it won't manifest itself years later as my neglected son who thinks it's necessary to go to jail to get my attention.

Speaking of games...any chance this cool new Batman will make his way to gaming? And if so, would you be in charge of the design?
I think that a game will be made eventually. Seeing as how a lot of my primary influences are from video game-related art, I would think it's a natural fit. A game of *The Batman* would be so great; we already have about 15 possible end bosses! I probably won't be in charge of the design, but as in most things relating to the show, I'm usually consulted. DC and Warner Bros. [illegible] in letting me have such a hands-on approach to all the ancillary products. It's important to me that *The Batman* has a very consistent look to it, from the Batman Strikes comic to the action figures from Mattel and the DVD covers. Wait 'til you see what Mattel and the Four Horsemen sculptors are doing with this show—unbelievable. Seeing my drawings sculpted in 3D and released as action figures is a dream come true.

What's your take on the current state of comic book films? Do you think they're doing their namesakes justice for the most part? Any favorites...any you particularly dislike?
I think comic book movies are a mixed bag. We now have the technology to pretty much do anything we want on screen, but that technology is still not always used by people with taste. Like with everything else, story is the basis for everything and no special effect can compensate for bad story. I loved *Spider-Man 2*; that was a perfect amalgam of solid story and cutting-edge technology. I've read the script to *Batman Begins*, and I think the story is awesome, I think when Hollywood gets the superhero genre right they really [illegible] when they really get it wrong...

When did you first discover your talent? And when did you discover or decide you could build a career out of it?
Ever since I could hold a pencil I've been drawing. I don't know when I decided I would do it as a career, but I also don't remember wanting to do anything else. I feel very lucky to be able to honestly say I love what I do. I'm not saying it's easy by any stretch, but being in the art field and having my desire to constantly learn and soak it all up really makes it a fun job.

You did some amazing work on the Buffy comics. If Joss Whedon decides to make a film, might he look your way for some of the design work, or was he far removed from the comics?
Joss wasn't far removed at all; he is incredibly hands-on and is very protective of his franchise. I'm a huge fan of his work on *Buffy* and *Angel*. We haven't had a chance to work with each other directly due to scheduling conflicts, but I would love to. We've always gotten along well, but in the area of design work you'd have to ask him!

Do you have any desire to work in or produce live action? What's next for Jeff Matsuda after *Batman* runs its course?
I would definitely love to work in producing live action; the idea of a different medium is pretty exciting. There's also a lot of other things I would like to try in the future. Since I just had a son, doing something that directly reflects in his world would be great, whether it be a children's book or clothing line; I don't know, it's been occupying my mind as I fall asleep recently. I am definitely jonesing to get into video games. I would love to design characters and help create the worlds in them.

Of everything you've accomplished so far in your career, what are you most proud of?
I would have to say I'm most proud of the working relationships that have grown from my experiences. No matter what projects I take, I've gotten to the point where my main criteria is that I enjoy the work. A lot of the enjoyment comes from the daily interaction with other team members. When people enjoy themselves, feel challenged and are excited about the project, they work and create at a higher level. A high-profile job that makes me miserable doesn't excite me all that much, and a smaller project with a sweet team does! **play**





The Players...

Above: Jeff poses with Ming-Na (*Street Fighter*'s Chun-Li), who plays Detective Ellen Yin, and Robert Englund who plays the Riddler. Additionally, Gina Gershon plays Catwoman, and voice acting superstar Clancy Brown (Crash Twinsanity's Neo Cortex) plays Mr. Freeze.



I, Robot

Starring: Will Smith, Bridget Moynahan, Bruce Greenwood
Director: Alex Proyas
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

Will Smith competently occupies the lead role of strained-humor cop Del Spooner, but the real stars of *I, Robot* are its intriguing mechanical creations, which are as slick as they are convincing as believable servants who could very easily exist harmoniously beside you and I far sooner than later. The robots cook, clean, deliver mail and provide company, and the latest units, called NS-5, are about to become as common as a kitchen refrigerator. When one of these units, who calls himself Sonny, apparently kills the lead scientist responsible for its creation, Spooner and the sexy robot researcher Susan Calvin (a boring, miscast Bridget Moynahan) go on a wild connect-the-dots ride through one special-effects laden action scene after another. Set in Chicago, the familiar visions of a future sci-fi world don't succumb to off-putting excess, completing a sense that this could really be our future space. As transparent and artificial as it all ultimately boils down to, the result is a treat for the eyes. The movie's at its best when its core ideas are explored in the quieter moments, revealing a depth of thought recycled yet poignant. Pulled from Isaac Asimov's famous 1940s series of robot tales and his three laws of robotics, the script straps on to summer-movie clichés and disarming stretches of throwaway scenes. Proyas hits us with some downright awful moments, but *I, Robot* packs enough genuine surprises and cool style to please a hungry sci-fi palette. Extras: Commentary by Proyas and screenwriter Akiva Goldsman. Production stills and The Making of *I, Robot*. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: B- **Extras:** C



The Day After Tomorrow

Starring: Dennis Quaid, Jake Gyllenhaal
Director: Roland Emmerich
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

I know a lot of people who liked *The Day After Tomorrow*, and I share their point: you go in knowing what to expect, and expect nothing more than to see the world get destroyed. What I didn't expect was a movie so dumb, so absurd, so lifelessly cobbled together that I'd walk out of the theater proclaiming it the worst movie of the year; at least *Van Helsing* had a certain color and energy. Effects-driven movies are becoming increasingly preposterous, yet *The Day After Tomorrow*'s ultimate failing is a complete lack of wonder behind its images of mass destruction. Forget any lifeline from the vacuous story: in the course of a few days, global warming leads to monsoons leads to an ice age leads to the climatologist who predicted it all trekking through blizzard white-out to save his son in New York. While earnest workaholic dad's on the phone with mom—she's nursing a cancerous child in her hospital ward and refuses to evacuate with the rest—leaping over collapsing fissures and convincing a bullheaded Vice President that the world is really—no, really, just look at the convincing science, sir!—about to end, son is falling in love with his cut-infected debate-team partner—the slow-mo kiss is priceless—almost drowning in frigid water on the pay phone, avoiding a pen of rabid CG dogs, and spearheading the book-burning to warm the library where they're all holed up. Never mind all that furniture far better suited for kindling; how would we get the jokes about burning books on tax code? Director Roland Emmerich, by no means a hack with the camera, wants so badly to inject a humanity into his disaster, which only lends a laughable, awkward pretentiousness that buries us with even more disinterest. The only emotion beating in this utter failure is relief when the sun finally parts the clouds and the credits roll.
Extras: Deleted scenes that fortunately were deleted. Audio commentary by Roland Emmerich, producer Mark Gordon, writer Jeffrey Nach anoff, cinematographer Ueli Steiger and editor Davi Brenner. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: F **Extras:** C



Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story

Starring: Vince Vaughn, Christine Taylor, Ben Stiller, Rip Torn, Justin Long
Director: Rawson Marshall Thurber
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

The problem with the overwhelming majority of comedies these days is that they're not funny. Amusing at times maybe, but when was the last time you experienced uncontrollable laughter? *Zoolander* was funny… When Stifler got peed on in *American Pie*…that was funny… The Waffler was funny. *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* is very, very funny. And not just sporadically: it's funny for the duration. If ever a movie was destined to tank, you'd think it'd be one about dodgeball with a puddle-deep story written and directed by a virtual unknown, but it's so well imagined you'll come away looking for ADAA matches in the channel guide. To heck with professional wrestling; pro dodgeball is where it's at! Oh, and I want my ESPN: the Ocho…we need the Ocho…finally, a sports network I can identify with! Bottom line: Rawson Marshall Thurber knows how to make us laugh and he had the perfect cast to do it. Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn are givens, but Rip Torn, Justin Long and Christine Taylor really drive it all home (cameos from Shatner and Hasselhoff don't hurt either).
Extras: Although the on the thin side (it's a movie about dodgeball; how deep could they go?), watch it all. Dodgeball Boot Camp and especially Justin Long: A Study in Ham & Cheese are requisite viewing. I had no idea how entertaining watching people getting hit with balls could be. **Dave Havlerson**
Movie: A- **Extras:** B

All-purpose cellular phone

T-Moblie Sidekick II

www.t-moblie.com Price: $299.99



With consumer electronics, it's all about convergence. We've seen pagers fall by the wayside in lieu of cell phones, and standalone PDAs are quickly losing ground. Nowadays consumers want convenience, and lately that usually involves an all-in-one device. T-Mobile introduced the original Sidekick two years ago. It was a bit awkward and cumbersome, but the device did all—email, appointments, web browsing and the all-important instant messaging. Although it was a great first effort, critics agreed the overall design needed work. Thankfully, T-Mobile listened, and the end result is the much leaner and sexier Sidekick II. Don't get us wrong; even though it's 25 percent thinner than the previous model, it's still a big phone—it's not for everyone. But what we do like are the new and improved features of the Sidekick II. Features like Intellisync, so you can sync with Outlook all of your contacts and appointments, and an integrated camera (with flash)—granted, it's not the best quality, but it's nice to have one. But the biggest improvement over the original Sidekick is the internal radio antenna. Now calls have better sound quality and users have a broader range of coverage. Bluetooth functionality would've been nice as well, but hopefully they'll put that in next time.

New type mouse

Logitech MX1000 Laser Mouse

www.logitech.com Price: $79.99

When the optical mouse was first introduced several years ago, it changed the way we moved a cursor onscreen. Logitech's latest mouse is the first significant advance for the hardware and it's revolutionary. Instead of an LED to light up the surface for the optical sensor, the MX1000 uses an infrared laser. Compared to an optical mouse, the MX1000 is 20 times more sensitive. This translates to more precise movements and incredible performance—basically, perfect for games. What's also cool about the MX1000 is that it works on surfaces where optical mice couldn't track reliably—like polished wood or glass desktops. Other key features include eight programmable buttons, a powerful lithium-ion battery that lasts up to a month without a charge and our favorite, an illuminated battery meter on the mouse itself. Although it's a little pricey, the MX1000's low latency and high level of performance is second to none. Once you experience Logitech's MX Laser Engine, you won't be able to go back to optical again.



Liquid crystal television

Samsung LTP468W LCD TV

www.samsung.com Price: $9,999.99

You want bragging rights? Samsung's latest LCD TV will make it easy for you. The LTP468W is the largest LCD TV on the market today with a 1920 x 1080p native resolution. Sure, Sony has a 70-inch LCD, but it can't match the picture quality of this baby. The LTP468W has an 800:1 contrast ratio, which is impressive in itself, but what we liked most is the 170 degree viewing angle. Whether you're right in front or off to either side, you're going to get an incredible view. The LTP468W also leads the industry with a 12-millisecond pixel response time. This translates to optimized viewing of fast-moving video (a typical hurdle for LCD TVs). Other features of the LTP468W include two tuners (for PIP), DVI, dual component video inputs and a HDMI digital video connector. For sound buffs, the unit houses an impressive JBL stereo speaker system with 30 watts of power.



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